

# Reading Strategy Instruction and Extensive Reading in Japanese High School Education: An Introductory Course in Jonan-Ryoso High School

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Extensive Reading (ER) aims to help learners develop good reading habits. Despite its well-documented benefits in the literature, this approach has yet to be accepted in foreign language education in Japan, where word-for-word translation has been the norm for decades. In this context, basic reading strategy instruction can prove a useful tool to help Japanese learners overcome this tendency, and at the same time pave the way for more effective implementations of ER practices. We report on a short course on reading strategy instruction we started in a private high school in Japan, during which 17 senior high school students were introduced to basic reading strategies for the purpose of limiting the need for dictionary use while reading. The test results mostly confirm that Japanese learners can benefit from this type of instruction, which can help them establish better reading habits and, consequently, engage more effectively in Extensive Reading.

Extensive Reading (ER) is an approach to language learning that aims to help learners develop good reading habits by engaging them in reading fairly large amounts of texts in the target language for extended periods of time (Jacobs & Gallo, 2002). Although it has been argued that it is not easy to observe any short-term benefits (Grabe & Stoller, 2002), long-term ones have been well documented, and include the development of learners' language skills and the improvement of their reading abilities (Mason & Krashen, 1997; Day & Bamford, 1998). However, ER has yet to be accepted in education in Japan. After six years of English classes in high school focusing mainly on grammar and vocabulary instruction (Hosoki, 2011), most Japanese students don't really know how to read English texts. Japanese teachers of English tend to attribute the need for this approach to the university entrance examinations for which they have to prepare their students. This practice, however, inevitably leads to grammar-focused methodologies being almost exclusively used with a clear focus on word-for-word translation. This tendency, coupled with the fact that the Japanese educational system has traditionally been teacher-centered (Hosoki), makes

ER even more difficult to implement.

To this end, specific reading strategies can provide a useful tool for students to overcome this habit and focus on reading itself, while also gaining a better understanding of written texts in English in general. We report on a three-month course on reading strategy instruction taught in a private high school in Japan with the medium of instruction being mostly English.

## Extensive Reading in EFL in Japan

Extensive Reading is a form of instruction, which maintains that language learners can improve their learning by reading large amounts of materials in the target language at a level they feel comfortable. The aim is not a thorough understanding of what is read, but rather a general understanding of the text that will be enough to keep learners reading. According to Richards and Schmidt (2002, pp. 193-194) in the course of this process learners gradually build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, while they develop good reading habits and, hopefully, a liking for reading as well. The origins of ER can be traced

back to Harold Palmer in 1917 (Day & Bamford, 1998), who first employed the term to differentiate it from the common practice of Intensive Reading (IR), which focuses on a detailed analysis of a text, its structure and vocabulary for accurate understanding. Since then, research has started to focus more on ER and its benefits (e.g., Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Mason & Krashen, 1997).

There is no hard and fast rule as to how much reading—or how many books even—constitute Extensive Reading; Day and Bamford (2002) consider one book per week as a good starting point to establish a reading habit. As for the selection of appropriate reading materials, Yamashita (2008) suggests the reader should make sure there are no more than 5 unknown words per page of text; significantly more unknown words per page means the reader should move to an easier level. Also, Grabe (2008, p. 311) recommends that readers be able to comprehend 98–99 percent of the vocabulary in a given text for the approach to be effective.

#### Foreign Language Education in Japan

Japanese students take English for 6 years in high school. However, classes tend to focus mostly on grammar and translation, while listening and speaking are rarely practiced in class. One of the reasons is that most Japanese teachers of English lack these skills themselves (Taguchi, 2005). Although English language education has been part of the school syllabus nationwide for several years, Japanese students' level of linguistic comprehension cannot compare to other Asian students', and that has been evident in the annual results and statistics of international foreign language examination boards, such as TOEFL, in which Japan has consistently held one of the lowest positions for years (Yoshida, 2009).

Several studies have tried to shed light on the reasons why Japanese learners of English fare so poorly. The main reason often brought up is the fact that Japanese teachers of English have traditionally favored Grammar-Translation methodologies (Taguchi, 2005) over more contemporary ones, leaving no room for other skills to be developed (Taguchi & Naganuma, 2006). Teachers often attribute this to the university entrance examinations, which practically shape the direction of foreign language education in the country, considering competition among students is rather fierce every year. As a result, students establish bad reading habits and never really learn

how to read, ending up in what Nuttal (2005) describes as *the vicious circle of the weak reader*, who reads slowly because he doesn't understand, and therefore doesn't enjoy reading. Because of that he doesn't read much, so he can't improve. Nuttal contrasted this with *the virtuous circle of the good reader* who reads fast, since he can understand what he reads, and so he reads more, since he enjoys what he reads, so he shows improvement.

As a result, the educational system in Japan has been cultivating bad reading habits. Sakai (2002) proposed three main principles Japanese learners need to adopt in order to become better readers: avoid the use of dictionaries, skip the parts you don't understand, and stop when you lose interest. It is evident that Japanese learners need help to overcome these old habits; this can come in the form of some basic reading strategy instruction.

#### Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies (LLS) are "special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain information" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Several classification schemes have been proposed over the years. Oxford's taxonomy (1986), however, which has been extensively used, provided the foundation for the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL), a questionnaire designed to assess the ways learning strategies are used in second language acquisition.

In this taxonomy two categories are particularly important for reading, namely, Cognitive Strategies (the mental processes that learners employ to make sense of their learning), such as analyzing and summarizing, and Compensation Strategies, that is, the processes learners use to make up for their lack of knowledge, such as guessing. We introduced a short strategy course at Jonan-Ryoso high school in Kyoto, Japan to test students' reactions as well as the effectiveness of such a course on students who have had over 5 years of English classes. Moreover, since we are also planning on implementing an Extensive Reading program in the school, we wanted to give students a set of tools that would help them make the most of Extensive Reading.

#### Jonan-Ryoso Course

17 third-year students attended the course. Since it was not part of the curriculum, attendance was not

compulsory. We met once a week for 90 minutes for a period of 14 weeks, and the language of instruction was mostly English.

Based on the requirements for effective Extensive Reading that Grabe (2008) proposed, namely knowledge of 98–99 percent of vocabulary, word and sentence processing, and awareness of how texts are structured, we focused on two categories from Oxford's taxonomy, Cognitive and Compensation Strategies, thus introducing 4 main areas that we thought the students would benefit from in the course: paragraph structure, summarization, contextual clues and making inferences—the former two targeting structural aspects of the language, while the latter two targeting the lack of vocabulary.

We prepared materials for each class with the help of the homeroom teacher as well as other sources, adapting them appropriately to suit the needs of each class. We used explicit instruction, introducing each strategy to the students, explaining its use, and the benefits they were expected to gain, and followed with practice. We also prepared handouts with an analysis of the structure of the texts we presented in class to give the students a visual representation of the flow of the texts, which they would be able to study on their own after class as well.

#### Evaluation and Discussion

We evaluated the students with the use of pretests and posttests. The areas we tested were summarization and context clues. For the summarization part, from a total of 17 students who attended all classes only 10 students took both the pretest and the posttest. Out of those only 2 did better and 3 were at the same level as the pretest, while 5 students fared worse. For the context clues part, the number of absentees was even higher with 12 students being absent. In this case, 4 students showed improvement, and only 1 fared as well as the pretest.

This was our first attempt at Jonan-Ryoso high school, so not everything went as planned. First of all, although the texts for the pretest and posttest for summarization were of about the same level, the pretest was on Friendship, which the students could have probably related much easier to, whereas the posttest was on communication, which might have been slightly more difficult in comparison; this could be one reason why the results were not consistent.

A problem that we didn't anticipate was the fact

that there were certain areas the students knew very little about, so we had to spend more time than we had planned explaining and practicing; such points were the topic sentence, or some types of context clues. Consequently, inferences were hardly covered.

Another point that needs to be taken into consideration is the fact that attendance was optional, which made it more difficult to consistently test all students. The problem was mainly with the latter half of the course, which coincided with the students' preparations for the university entrance examinations; so although students showed great interest and attended regularly the first weeks, the majority couldn't attend as regularly after a certain point.

The course was well received by the teachers as well—several of them observed our classes over the course of these 14 weeks. This, combined with the doubling of the number of students signing up for a future course (from 17 to 34), led us to plan a revised course for the following year, taking into account the feedback we received and the difficulties we encountered during this first year.

#### Conclusion

Foreign language education in Japan has been somewhat of a conundrum for decades. The persistence of Japanese English teachers in old methodologies (Taguchi, 2005; Taguchi & Naganuma, 2006) along with the way foreign language education is tied to the university entrance exams have done little to help Japanese learners become proficient in the language they spend at least 6 years studying in high school. Extensive Reading seems to be a promising way out of this vicious circle in which the Japanese educational system seems to have trapped its students. Owing to this shaky foundation of English knowledge that students receive, reading strategies seem like the best companion to Extensive Reading. The results from our short course at Jonan-Ryoso high school show that learning strategies in general, and reading strategies in particular, can enhance the already well-documented advantages of Extensive Reading.

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