

The Effects of a Reading Strategy and Reciprocal Peer Tutoring on Intermediate Japanese Reading Comprehension

MORIMOTO Takiko*

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Can innovative teaching approaches that are successful in the teaching of cognate foreign languages to English speakers be effective in the teaching of Japanese? This study proposes reasons for the reluctance of teachers of Japanese to apply such approaches, and accounts for the absence of research on L2 comprehension of Japanese text. One successful innovation for the teaching of reading comprehension in cognate languages is the teaching of comprehension strategies—making and confirming predictions, summarizing, questioning, and clarifying. Another is reciprocal peer tutoring (RPT), whereby pairs of students engage in dialogue while reading. This study evaluates the effects on comprehension in applying both of these innovations with intermediate-level students of Japanese and seeks to determine what type of learners derives the greatest benefit. Eighteen junior college students were given five opportunities during the semester to practice the comprehension strategies using RPT. Pre- and post-tests of reading comprehension were administered, and assessments were made of reading comprehension after each of the practice sessions. Analyses of test results support the finding from studies of cognate-language instruction that comprehension strategies and RPT are effective in learning to comprehend L2 text. The implications for teaching reading comprehension of Japanese text are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers of Japanese as a foreign language have developed new teaching methods after being stimulated by the ideas and techniques which were used successfully in the teaching of European languages such as French, Spanish, and German and in the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL). For example, those who have adopt-

* 森本多喜子: Associate Professor, El Camino College, U.S.A.

ed new communicative approaches in teaching beginning-level students report significant gains in student performance in oral communication. At the intermediate level, however, where reading comprehension is required, teachers of Japanese have adopted fewer innovations. There are several reasons for the absence of attention to the teaching of reading comprehension in the Japanese classroom:

1) Reading comprehension in many European languages is a less severe problem for English speakers than in their reading of Japanese. Similarity between English and European languages permits transfer of comprehension skills. This may not be so in learning Japanese, since both reading and writing differ from English and European languages in terms of a complicated writing system (kanji and kana) and the paragraph organization of Japanese passages.

2) The number of students in the intermediate and upper-division Japanese courses in universities is still very small. Consequently, language specialists, researchers, and commercial publishers have not focused on the special needs of those in the advanced courses. There are few textbooks for helping students comprehend Japanese text, and there are insufficient research data to guide instructors in the teaching of reading comprehension.

3) Many instructors in the Japanese reading class only know the translation method of teaching comprehension, and rely upon drills for teaching kanji and expression patterns that are found in the particular reading materials. Even though individual students vary considerably in their learning of kanji and vocabulary, the translation method and accompanying drills are uniformly administered to all.

A partial answer to the need for a new approach in the teaching of comprehension of Japanese text is the teaching of comprehension strategies through reciprocal peer tutoring (RPT)—where pairs of students take turns leading a dialogue centered on pertinent features of the text using the strategies. This study attempts to determine whether or not the strategies and the RPT method are effective in the reading comprehension of students in an intermediate Japanese reading class.

Research Background

Reciprocal peer tutoring using comprehension strategies has been found to be a powerful tool for meeting both the academic and social needs of students in schools at all levels in the United States. Palincsar and Brown (1984) reported that American junior high-school students made significant gains in reading comprehension of expository passages of social studies and science through a reciprocal peer tutoring procedure. Their RPT procedure focused on four concrete activities—summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting, while taking turns in reading each paragraph of the passages. At the college level, Fantuzzo (1989) reported that the RPT strategy was effective in producing cognitive gain as well as lowering subjective stress and enhancing course satisfaction. Lysynchuck (1989) and Haller et al. (1988) found that the RPT method was effective at various levels of education and with a variety of learning disabled students.

Two theoretical conceptions underlie the RPT method. One is an emphasis on development of metacognitive strategies consistent with the view that the learner is active and motivated to explore and seek explanations, instead of emphasizing drill and practice, which assumes that the learner is passive but compliant. The second conception is that learning results from internalizing activities originally experienced in socialization and interaction with others. As Vigotsky (1978) has pointed out, socialization and internalization are key mechanisms for learning and thinking.

In the field of reading comprehension in Japanese, Morimoto (1990) found that graduate students in an advanced Japanese reading class improved their reading comprehension significantly through the teaching of comprehension strategies and reciprocal peer tutoring when reading Japanese newspapers, magazines, and short essays. Itō (1991) reported that the teaching of strategies such as summarization of paragraphs, discussion, questioning, and clarifying was effective in improving reading proficiency in Japanese. However, Itō did not use peer interactions for the teaching of these strategies.

Method

Sample

The participants were eighteen junior college students in a Japanese 3 class (the third semester after completion of a 180-hour study of elementary Japanese or equivalent). Twelve students were native speakers of English (two out of these twelve students spoke both Japanese and English at home). Three students were from Taiwan, and another three students were native speakers of Korean.

To establish base-line comprehension scores, the students were given a pre-test of reading comprehension. The test was a 500-character expository passage from a textbook in Japanese. Students answered questions about this passage. Answers to the questions required both literal and inferential comprehension. The pre-testing revealed scores ranging from 10% to 100% with a mean percentage of 58.6% correct.

Materials

Six reading passages were available for training, averaging 500–700 characters each. These passages were selected from the textbook, *A Course in Modern Japanese*, Vol. 3 (Mizutani et al., ed., 1988, Nagoya University Press). All passages were in the expository style and featured sociological, geographical, and cultural information. A vocabulary list, which included English translations of 60–90 words with hiragana readings for kanji, was attached to the material. However, this list did not cover all the words, and students were required to infer the meanings of the unfamiliar words from the context.

Procedure

Students were assigned to pairs with one member of each pair represented by a student who ranked high (above 70% correct comprehension) on the pre-test, and the other

member one who ranked low (below 50% correct comprehension). The pair was not fixed; whenever new reading material was assigned, students switched partners. All pairs, however, always comprised a high and a low comprehender.

Initially, the instructor modeled the comprehension strategies to be used by the pairs: asking questions about the passage, summarizing the content (sentence base), clarifying ambiguities, and predicting future content. The rationale for the intervention was also given. The rationale was that students were learning a generalizable skill that would contribute to the comprehension of future Japanese texts.

Subsequently, students, working in pairs, read given segments of text silently and then took turns leading a dialogue on pertinent features of the segments. Each of the strategies was employed at every turn. Illustrations of a RPT dialogue are as follows:

Text: The beginning paragraph of Lesson 3 in the textbook.

女性研究者は板ばさみ

大学院を卒業した女性は家庭か研究かの選択を迫られ、5人に1人は子供を産まない決心をしている。また、大学院を出ても定職がないオーバードクター経験者は半数近くにのぼり、平均3年以上を非常勤講師やアルバイトなどで生活している——女性研究者を取り巻く深刻な現実が、京都大学院を卒業した女性を対象に行ったアンケート調査で浮かび上がってきた。

(「朝日新聞」1986年12月10日付朝刊)

A: A student with a higher score on the pre-test

B: A student with a lower score on the pre-test

- A: My summary of the first sentence is that women who completed graduate school have to choose either family or research, and some decided not to have a child.
- B: What does “*sentaku o semarare*” mean? Can you paraphrase it with an easy expression?
- A: I would say it as “*erabanakereba narimasen.*”
- B: “Oh, it means that they must choose, doesn’t it?”
- A: Right. I think this sentence explains a lot of the title of the passage.
- B: Do you mean that women researchers are caught between family life and research activity?
- A: That’s good. What do you think comes in the next sentence?
- B: Well, I would predict that there will be more explanation about women researchers’ problems. OK. Let’s read the next sentence.
—Then both students A & B read silently and then take turns, reversing their roles—
- B: I don’t understand the beginning section, but I would summarize that a lot of women researchers are working at part-time jobs for 3 years. Is it OK?

- A: Well, it's almost that. But, it says that they work more than three years, doesn't it?
- B: You are right. The word "*ijoo*" means more. Please help me translate the beginning section.
- A: Why don't you try? I think that something refers to half of the women.
- B: Oh, I guess it may be the number of women who could not find jobs.
- A: Yes, yes. Is it serious in Japan when they can't find jobs after graduation?
- B: I think so. I know that Japan's unemployment is usually very low. I predict that the next sentence will give meaning to this figure.
—They read the next sentence and continue taking turns—
- A: Yes, you are right. The sentence says that women researchers are caught up in a very severe reality.
- B: Really? How did they find out?
- A: Kyoto University conducted a survey.
- B: I still don't understand this sentence. What is the structure of this sentence?
- A: Oh, you see the particle "*ga*," which indicates the subject.
- B: And the word "*ukabiagatte kita*" at the end of the sentence is the verb, isn't it?
- A: Yes. So, this sentence may be summarized by saying that a difficult situation for women researchers has appeared.
- B: OK. I got it. So what would you say about a summary for the entire paragraph?
- A: How about this? Japanese women researchers have a hard choice between finding a job and keeping a family life. They can't have both.

Each training session lasted 30 minutes and was followed by a ten-item test assessing both literal and interpretative comprehension of the selections. Although students read each passage with their partners, each student responded to the test individually (without any help from the partner). The length of the test was 15–20 minutes per test. (See Appendix A for an example of the test.)

There were five training sessions every other week (a total of 10 weeks). A post-test was given one week after the training. This test consisted of both familiar and unfamiliar reading material. Students were asked to respond to questions about the passages, indicating their comprehension of the readings.

Results and Analysis

Table 1 shows the improvement in reading comprehension. The percentages are reported for pre-test scores, performances on the test given at each training session, and the final post-test.

It is noted that all students except one increased their comprehension on the post-test.

Table 1 Comprehension Scores Before, During and After RPT*

Student	Pre-test	Interventions					Post-test
		#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	
#1	100%	85	95	100	70	95	100
#2	100	75	100	100	—	90	95
#3	95	90	80	80	100	100	90
#4	90	75	90	100	—	100	100
#5	90	100	95	100	100	90	95
#6	90	80	—	90	—	85	100
#7	85	90	65	75	—	85	100
#8	70	80	90	95	40	95	100
#9	50	60	85	80	—	95	100
#10	50	75	65	—	80	70	60
#11	50	75	60	—	80	90	70
#12	40	90	70	75	40	85	90
#13	40	45	40	60	80	95	60
#14	35	60	60	30	40	80	70
#15	30	45	—	60	80	80	95
#16	20	65	65	40	80	65	50
#17	10	60	40	40	90	65	70
#18	10	20	60	—	95	75	60
Mean score	58.6	70.5	72.5	75.0	75.0	85.5	83.6

* Chinese foreign students=Student Nos. 2, 3, and 6.

Korean foreign students=Student Nos. 8, 9, and 12.

Others are English native speakers.

The mark “—” indicates that students were absent.

Table 2 shows the mean gain scores by ability level. As shown in the table, the treatment was especially effective for those who were initially poor in comprehension.

Table 2 Comprehension Gain Scores by Ability

	Mean score on pre-test	Mean score on post-test	Mean score of gains
High-ability group (n=8)	90.0	97.5	7.5
Low-ability group (n=10)	33.5	72.5	39.0

At all testing points, students were more successful in answering factual questions than in responding to questions that called for inferences. Students reported that they enjoyed the intervention and said that the procedure reduced their stress in reading.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study was concerned with the generalizability of innovative teaching approaches developed for teaching cognate languages to the teaching of Japanese as a true foreign language for English speakers. The results indicate that at least two new related teaching approaches—RPT and the reading comprehension strategies, which have been found effective in learning a cognate language, are also effective in learning to comprehend Japanese text. Often teachers of Japanese hesitate to employ approaches used by teachers of other languages because they believe Japanese to be unique. Although it is true that the Japanese writing system and other features differ considerably from those of languages cognate with English, RPT and reading comprehension strategies are applicable in the Japanese context.

A related concern was that teachers of Japanese typically rely on a single approach to the teaching of reading comprehension—the translation method. The present study offers an alternative approach which shows much promise. Although this study was conducted with a limited sample and without a control group, the strength of the positive findings associated with RPT and comprehension strategies suggest that these innovations warrant replication by those teachers now using only the translation method. Teachers may want to vary the texts to include a wider sample of reading materials. The present study featured expository text only. They also may want to include other variables in their efforts to validate these new approaches.

With respect to the problem of how to help students of widely different comprehension levels in the same classroom, this study has shown that the RPT method is a practical answer. Whereas the traditional translation method, which involves total class instructions, often bores the advanced students and frustrates those at lower levels, RPT had positive effects for both groups. Working together, as advanced- and lower-level students, both progressed.

It should be noted that there was a strong connection between reading comprehension and the ability to recognize kanji. Prior to the intervention trainings, the Taiwanese students, who recognized kanji, but were not fluent in Japanese, were able to comprehend at a higher level. Unlike the cognate language, the reading of Japanese is more dependent on visual representation and less dependent on oral pronunciation.

In conclusion, this study has shown that the teaching of reading comprehension strategies contributes to student comprehension of Japanese text, and that while the RPT approach is beneficial for all students, it is especially valuable for low comprehenders. Also, it appears the RPT may be of value in reducing student anxiety while leading to read.

It should be noted that the present study has combined two methods that have been used successfully in other investigations. RPT used together with the teaching of comprehension strategies makes it possible for instructors to move from a passive teacher-controlled classroom to active learning situations.

Appendix A

A Sample of Questions Related to the Content of the Reading Selection

第三課 読む練習

日本語で答(こた)えを書きなさい。

1. この調査は、どんな女性について調(しら)べましたか。
2. どこで大学で調査しましたか。
3. 何人ぐらいの女性が回答しましたか。
4. 回答した女性の何%ぐらいが、結婚していましたか。
5. それ(Q4)は、ふつうの女性に比べてどうですか。
6. 女性は、どんなことに板(いた)ばさみになっているんですか。
7. 結婚している女性の何%ぐらいが、家庭より研究が大事(だいじ)だと思っていますか。
8. 結婚していない女性の何%ぐらいが、研究と家庭は両立(りやうりつ)すると思っていますか。
9. この調査から、日本の社会はどんな問題があると言えますか。
10. 女性の人: あなたは、研究と家庭が両立すると思いますか。

なぜ、そう思うのですか。

男性の人: もし、あなたのガールフレンドが、「子供より研究の方がたいせつだ」と言ったら、どう言いますか。

どうして、そう言うのですか。

Note: Questions 1-5 require literal answers.

Questions 6-9 require inferential answers.

Question 10 requires a personal response.

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