

Some Aspects of Students' Behaviour When Reading in Japanese

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There has been much research undertaken in the field of L2 reading, particularly where the L2 is English. There is, however, a lack of information about L2 reading in other languages, especially character-based languages such as Japanese and Chinese.

This study sought to discover how students behave when reading Japanese. Ten pairs of students at (pre) intermediate-level read aloud a passage of Japanese, which was recorded and transcribed. The students were of six sub-groups: high and low ability students who had studied Japanese from Beginners' Japanese in university, those who had studied to VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) level in high school, and those who had spent some time in Japan, usually as exchange students. The groups were determined by the students' mid-year examination results: students who achieved 80–95% were allocated to the H (high) group; students whose results were between 50–65% were allocated to the L (low) group. All pairs consisted of students of the same level.

The data was analysed for the behaviours demonstrated by students when reading in Japanese. The three behaviours observed were:

1. Discovery of Topic/Picture Recognition
2. Self Assessment
3. Automaticity

High-group students discovered the topic earlier and made use of the pictures in their comprehension of the passage by utilising them to activate the appropriate schema. Automaticity was found to be more common in the returned exchange students. Low-group students exhibited a range of self-defeating behaviours, including poor self-assessment. This group made little or no use of the pictures to aid their comprehension, and took longer to discover the topic of the passage.

It would seem that there are several ways in which the low-group students'

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performance could be improved. Activities such as pre-reading tasks would assist students in recognising extra-text information as well as improving students' perceptions of their abilities and improving students' overall performance. Suggestions are made for incorporating the teaching of effective reading strategies into classroom work.

INTRODUCTION

Grabe (1991: 375) states that "reading is probably the most important skill for second language learners in academic contexts." Yet, for English-speaking learners of Japanese, reading is, despite being a "receptive" skill, perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of the language. In Japanese, the complexity of the script creates a hurdle to text comprehension and renders the text inaccessible without considerable effort on the part of the learner. The problems of a culturally unfamiliar context are of secondary importance to overcoming linguistic and orthographic barriers. Kanji, the logography consisting of characters of Chinese origin, is not easily accessed by simply using a dictionary: much more knowledge of characters and their readings and composition is required. The nature of the script is such that, apart from punctuation, there are usually no gaps in the text between words. Grammatical differences in terms of unfamiliar syntactic elements and word order are further obstacles to enjoyment of reading.

Previous Studies

Several studies have been made of learners of Japanese (and Chinese). Reading strategies have been examined by Pavlidis (1990) (Chinese), Koda (1990), Taniguchi (1990, 1991), and Ogawa (1991).

Taniguchi (1991) found that foreign students learning Japanese used the following strategies:

1. guessing from the topic or pictures/charts;
2. using seven separate strategies for decoding unknown vocabulary/kanji:
 - a) guessing the meaning of a kanji from one part of the kanji;
 - b) guessing the meaning of a two-character compound from one of the kanji;
 - c) guessing from general principles of compounding;
 - d) guessing from words with similar sounds;
 - e) guessing from words with similar physical forms;
 - f) guessing the word by theorising about what part of speech it might be; and
 - g) guessing using one's background knowledge;
3. judicious selection and dismissal of items;
4. self- and peer-correction/monitoring;
5. use of content words rather than syntactic clues to work out meaning.

Similar (but fewer) strategies were also found in Taniguchi's 1990 study.

Ogawa (1991) found that the most commonly used strategy was guessing from the

context, but his learners were rated as "advanced level," which may mean that they were less word-bound and were able to look for the overall context more easily. While much work has been completed on reading in L2, this L2 is almost inevitably English. There is certainly a need for much more research into reading in character-based languages in particular before any generalisations can be made as to the inter-language applicability of the various reading strategies.

The Context of This Study

Students studying Intermediate Japanese at the University of Melbourne completed a Course Evaluation Survey halfway through the academic year, and while generally students considered that the reading classes were helpful for improving reading skills (79%), the majority of students found the texts very difficult (59%). Analysis of the survey section "Other Comments" revealed that students seemed to have a tendency to look up every word and kanji before beginning to read, and that they felt discouraged at their perceived lack of progress due to the length of time required to read the weekly passages and complete the homework.

As a result, it was decided to examine in more detail exactly how students read in Japanese, and what problems students encounter. Having discussed the results of observing students while reading, and analysing tape transcripts, some recommendations for the teaching of skills for reading in Japanese will be given. It is hoped that these recommendations will be of practical value in improving course and curriculum design in the teaching of Japanese to speakers of English.

Method

The Students

This study sample consisted of 20 students selected from a group of 120 students enrolled in Intermediate Japanese at the University of Melbourne. These 20 students formed ten pairs based on two criteria: 1) proficiency, and 2) background/length of stay in Japan. Proficiency was determined as 'high' or 'low' from the written component of the mid-year examination. 'High' students (H) attained 80–95% on the examination, and students whose grades were between 50–63% were categorised as 'low' (L). Six pairs of high students and four pairs of low students were selected based on their background in learning Japanese: those who had spent considerable time in Japan (four months to one year) (E); those who had studied Japanese at high school to VCE level, and had spent not more than two months in Japan (V); and those whose study of the language had begun only 18 months previously in "Beginners Japanese" at the University (B) (in this group, only one had been to Japan, several years prior to commencing study of Japanese).

The students were all native speakers of English, and had no previous experience of learning a character-based language, specifically Chinese, which may have influenced their reading ability.

The Task

The text selected for the study was on the topic of *portable telephones*, and had appeared in the August 1992 edition of *Nihongo Journal*, a monthly magazine for beginning to intermediate students of Japanese (those who have studied up to 300–450 hours of the language).

The text was chosen because it was readily comprehensible in terms of context, but it contained a certain amount of unfamiliar kanji and vocabulary. At approximately 400 characters, the text was of a reasonable length for the current study without being so long as to be a daunting task for the readers. It contained a mix of kanji, the Chinese-based characters, and hiragana and katakana, the phonetic syllabaries.

The level of difficulty for the text was set by the journal editors at ‘upper-beginning,’ meaning approximately 300 hours of study. Thus it could be anticipated that it would be a challenge for students from Beginners Japanese, who at this stage had received only 225 hours of formal instruction.

As the content (‘portable telephones’) was something with which all students could be expected to be reasonably familiar, the challenge would be found in aspects of grammar and orthography.

Furigana were given for kanji which students had not been taught in class; where the word was repeated several times in the text the *furigana* was given only in the first instance.

Pictures (also from *Nihongo Journal*) were included on the reading-exercise sheet to aid students’ comprehension, as well as to check how effectively such extra-text information was utilised. The text was re-typed onto one sheet, whereas in *NJ* it appeared over two pages. This was simply to make the reading exercise sheet more manageable, as well as to reduce the amount of *furigana* given. In the original text, all kanji were supplied with *furigana*. No changes were made to the actual text itself.

The Methodology

Students were assigned to their pairs with a student of similar background and ability and were asked to read the passage together in a simulation of what students do routinely in reading classes. From classroom observation it is apparent that most pairs read a sentence or a paragraph each, then go back and try to “translate” the passage. While in class, students are encouraged to discuss the passage in Japanese, whereas for this study they were asked to discuss it in English. It was thought that students would be able to express themselves better in English, and this would assist in the observation and codification of strategies and behaviours. Pair work was the method chosen because it was what students had become accustomed to over the previous semester, and pair interaction with the passage and each other would be more natural than having students think aloud as they read.

Students were given the reading exercise sheet and told to go through it as usual, but to discuss it in English. Dictionaries and other kanji references were not to be used. The tape recorder was switched on by the researcher, and students were left to

read together until they considered themselves to have finished.

The recordings were subsequently transcribed and analysed for behaviours observed, problems encountered, and the solution strategies used.

Results

Three main behaviours were observed: Discovery of Topic/Picture Recognition; Self-Assessment; and Automaticity.

Discovery of Topic/Picture Recognition

Early discovery of the topic assists in context-setting for the whole passage, and activates the appropriate schema. While the *furigana* are given for the topic written in kanji in the heading, students did not know the meaning of the characters and were required to deduce it from the context or from the pictures at the bottom of the page.

High-level students did this more quickly than low-level students. High-ability students discovered the meaning of the headline characters between the sixth and eleventh lines of interaction. Low-level students can be separated into two subcategories for this behaviour: pairs who had studied Japanese to VCE level realised the topic between lines 50 and 75, while pairs from Beginners Japanese did not discover the topic until between the 141st and 157th lines.

All pairs except one recognised the pictures as relevant to the text, but, as with Discovery of Topic, the less able low students were more likely to realise the usefulness of the pictures later.

Self Assessment

This category refers to the overtly stated beliefs of the students about their ability to read and to successfully complete the task. While both high and low groups had similar incidences of positive self-assessment, the low group reveals a significantly (almost three times) larger number of incidences of negative self-assessment.

Table 1 Topic Discovery

Pair	Discovery of topic (line of interaction)
EH1, 2	9, 10
EH3, 4	6, 7
VH1, 2	11, 12, 13
VH3, 4	10, 11, 12
BH1, 2	10, 11
BH3, 4	10, 11
VL3, 4	50, 51, 52, 53
VL5, 6	75, 76
BL1, 2	141, 142
BL3, 4	157, 158

Table 2 Picture Recognition

Group	Recognition	Line(s)
EH1, 2	yes	10-12
EH3, 4	yes	7, 8
VH1, 2	yes	13
VH3, 4	yes	10-12
BH1, 2	yes	11
BH3, 4	yes	68
VL3, 4	yes	52
VL5, 6	yes	81
BL1, 2	yes	140
BL3, 4	yes	158

Whether this is a reflection of, or an influence on, their ability (i.e., self-fulfilling prophecy) is not clear from this study.

It is of interest to note that there is only one incidence of negative self-assessment in the EH group, the group with the longest exposure to Japanese in Japan, which may be a reflection of considerable confidence. On the other hand, there is not even one positive self-assessment comment in subgroups VH and BL, perhaps reflecting a severe lack of confidence in their reading ability.

Automaticity

Automaticity is defined in Grabe (1991: 379, 380) as being that state in which “the reader is unaware of the process, not consciously controlling the process, and using little processing capacity.” In this study, vocabulary or kanji automaticity is defined as being when the meaning or reading occurs in the same turn or the next turn (of either partner), and where the reader does not vocalise questions about the item (i.e., there is no use of prompts such as repetition of the item, overt questioning of the partner, long pauses, etc.).

Here, it seems it can be concluded that longer exposure to the language results in greater automaticity. Where the EH group totals fifteen incidences of automaticity, both low and high ex-VCE groups achieved 8 and 9 incidences, respectively. Pairs from Beginners Japanese had the most difficulty in instantly recognising vocabulary and kanji, but, as stated previously, their exposure to the language was only 225 hours (approximately).

Analysis of The Data

High Ability Group

High-level readers displayed behaviour which is representative of effective reading methods. High-level readers were more likely to discover the topic of the reading passage earlier, and thus subsequent reading was working from an appropriately activated schema. This was seen in higher level students irrespective of how long they had been studying Japanese.

The use of illustrations to assist the reader with text comprehension was found to

Table 3 Self-Assessment (number of comments by individuals)

Group	Self-assessment	
	Positive	Negative
EH	3	1
VH	0	4
BH	3	5
	Total = 6	Total = 10
VL	4	16
BL	0	12
	Total = 4	Total = 28

Table 4 Automaticity

Group	Vocabulary/kanji automaticity
EH	15
VH	9
BH	2
VL	8
BL	2

be beneficial to the high-level readers, and was instrumental in their early discovery of the topic. One student, however, seemed to consider this to be “cheating”:

- (i) 9 EH2 It's a portable phone, reckon? Sorry, go on.
 10 EH1 You just looked, there're the pictures.

High students also displayed a greater incidence of automaticity in reading, which was most observable in those who had had the longest exposure to the language. Automaticity was evidence of the large recognition vocabulary these students had to work from, and reinforces the need for students to acquire a considerable vocabulary as soon as possible.

- (ii) 136 EH1 *Jibun dake no jikan ga nakunaru kamo shirenai* (. . .) Your own time to yourself. It just disappears!

A interesting example of automaticity is quoted below:

- (iii) 145 EH2 Ok, where are we? *Shikashi, shikashi, minna ga keitai denwa o mottara resutoran ya, michi ya, densha no naka de shotchu beru ga naru*. Well, that's understandable.

Does “well, that's understandable” mean that the previous sentence had been fully comprehended by the reader, or was the reader making a comment on the content of the passage, which also indicates instant comprehension? Nevertheless, it is a good example of EH2's reading style, which is rapid, fluent, and very close to native.

Low Ability Group

Low-level students displayed a range of self-defeating behaviours. Whether these reflect their lack of ability or cause it is a matter for further research. However, it is possible that some of their behaviours could be improved by skills training.

Lower ability students consistently self-assessed themselves negatively. Are the students being painfully honest with themselves and their partners, or are they creating self-fulfilling prophecies? The students begin reading under the assumption that they will have trouble understanding, and they do. This can be seen in the following examples:

- (iv) 6 VL2 I'm really bad on *kanji*, I mean.
 (v) 82 VL5 How big do you feel?
 83 VL6 . . . and, and it's on the tape and everything. Sorry, miss, we're not really as stupid as we look.
 (vi) 84 BL3 Um, we're not doing a very good job with the English.

Further, the low-level students did not realise the usefulness of the illustrations provided until they were well into the text. On many occasions the students did not realise that the pictures were there, and some saw the pictures but did not think them relevant. This was a hindrance to their comprehension as the pictures provided many clues as to the content of the passage, with illustrations of three of the situations referred to therein.

- (vii) 140 BL1 . . . Hold on, maybe it's, what's that picture?
 141 BL2 It's not a mobile phone.
 142 BL1 Portable phone! Oh, we didn't even look at the pictures!
 143 BL2 Yeah, that's good! Saw those pictures there, I knew that.

A further interesting note to these illustrations is the concept that not all readers will interpret the pictures in the same way. Just as unfamiliar cultural content in a text can confuse the non-native reader, unfamiliar ideas expressed in picture form, or familiar ideas represented in unfamiliar graphic form, can also mislead the reader.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data analysed earlier, it is not unreasonable to conclude that there are several fundamental skills which can be introduced and practised in the Japanese-language classroom.

First, illustration recognition. It would be quite straightforward to practise looking at the pictures provided and guessing the topic and content of the text. This is a method of activating schema in the minds of the students, and would get them started in the right direction.

It is probably a difficult task to alter learners' perceptions of their ability, but the great amount of negativity among the lower ability group is some cause for concern. Obviously this group feels out of its depth with the level of text presented. Perhaps pre-reading activities would have prepared them for the topic and rendered it less stressful. A dilemma intrinsic to mixed ability classes is, however, that students are constantly comparing themselves to their classmates and the poorer students are understandably negative when they hear high ability students talking about how easy a text is and how bored and unchallenged they are. However, further research may yet define the more positive aspects to mixed ability classes and this researcher, at least, is reluctant to "stream" away too many differences.

Automaticity appears to be dependent on time and effort. It is an unpopular idea, but learning a language does take time and it involves a lot of hard work. Being able to recognise words instantly, without even being aware of it, is the result of a lot of reading practice. While classtime is necessarily limited, and students' interest and motivation variable, a possible answer to this may be a sort of 'self-access' centre for reading materials. A system with reading practices from all sorts of sources with just a few questions on each, graded at various levels of difficulty, could be useful both for the keen student who wants to improve, and the poorer student who needs to. 'Self-access' centres bring up the additional questions of enforcement and teacher-student "contracts," but these are yet another issue for further study.

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