EFL READING IN JAPAN

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I. Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in Japan
II. EFL Reading in Japan
III. FL Reading Model and Suggestions for EFL Reading Improvement

I

It has been assumed that the major purpose for English language teaching and learning in Japan is the promotion of understanding and knowledge of Western civilization. This has been undertaken chiefly through printed matter due to the fact that geographically and culturally Japan is isolated from the Western world. Consequently, of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the English language, the most important is considered to be reading.

I would like to discuss in this paper the state of the skill in Japan today: what seems to be the problem and how we may possibly solve it.

First, a brief survey of TEFL in Japan will be necessary to understand the background.

Statistics show that 99.9% of the relevant age group are enrolled in junior high school; 90% in senior high; and 25% in university and college. And all of the students invariably take English courses.

Though English is officially an elective subject in junior high school, it enrolls more than 99% of all the students for three years. About 90% of the junior high graduates are admitted to senior high school, and approximately 99% of these students study English for
three years. English is also the most commonly studied language in university and college where more than 25% of the same generation are enrolled. Usually, 8 credit hours of English (that is equivalent to 16 credits in the American university system) is required.

In terms of hours, an average Japanese junior high school student STUDIES English for 525 class hours (5 class hours per week x 35 weeks per year x 3 years); an average senior high student, the same; and in college and university an average student spends 280 class hours (4 class hours per week x 35 weeks per year x 2 years) for English. So altogether, a Japanese university or college graduate (not an English major) has spent a total of 1,330 class hours (525+525+280) on STUDYING English. This is to say, one whole school year out of 14 or 16 years of formal education is exclusively spent on the English language (a student’s class hours per week: 8 class hours per day x 5 days = 40/1,330 class hours divided by 40 class hours ÷ 35 weeks = one school year). It is indeed surprising to know that EFL occupies such an enormous amount of STUDY time in the Japanese school system.

In terms of motivation, junior high school students take English courses because English is a course everybody takes and because it is an important subject in entrance examinations to senior high school. Their future social survival will not depend on how well they learn English as the case may be in the United States for those racially minority children or adults who are enrolled in ESL courses. For Japanese senior high school students, again the motivation for English is weak. They study English because it is considered the most important subject in the university entrance examination.

It is to be admitted that the MOTIVATION for EFL does not lie
so much in the individual learner as in the nation whose educational policy requires English. Ever since the Meiji Restoration when Japan opened her tightly closed door to the West after more than 200 years of political isolation from the rest of the world, the Government has consistently pursued the policy of modernization and industrialization. The password has been "Catch up with the West." In the field of education it has meant learning Western science and technology. It has also meant learning Western languages, because they contain and carry Western civilization. So national leaders for generations have followed the national goal of Westernization, even if it may be only in the sphere of the material and not of the spirit. The very unanimous and extensive TEFL program in the Japanese school system can only be understood in the light of this national goal.

There is another way to look at it. Japanese educators would like to justify the occupation of students with the study of English by philosophizing that English contributes to "Menschenbildung", that is, it helps to educate a learner to be a better human being. They say that English trains a student to think logically, to see the world objectively, and so on. Teachers of English, who are many (every tenth teacher in Japan may be a teacher of English), like the idea and want to be fortified with it because, at the rise of nationalism, they must somehow defend their profession. The justifying philosophy, or any philosophy as such, however, must be admitted to be weak as a motivating force.

II

Because Japanese students study English for so many years and spend so much time on it, a question may be asked whether English
language education is successful or not.

A hasty answer to this may be no, because apparently it has not produced many speakers of English. A more considered answer can be yes, because after all Japan has realized its national goal of modernization and caught up with the West, which means that the content of the Western languages has been learned so well as to become part of the learner.

A correct answer to the question seems to be yes and no, because for most Japanese students of English, real occasions for use are scarce and their knowledge of English, or any foreign language for that matter, remains in the unconscious potential sphere of the mind.

Japan is a monolingual society. Japanese is the only language spoken in everyday life by 100 million people. College students of science and technology can learn almost everything in the Japanese language. Even students of English literature can read almost all English and American literary works in Japanese translation. A complaint is heard from the lips of English professors that their students do not read English poems and novels in their original.

Japanese EFL students do not live in an English-speaking

1 There are reports that when a real occasion for use occurs the knowledge of a foreign language comes up to the fore of the mind and work miraculously. I know personally a Japanese professor of English literature who spent a couple of years in a Soviet P. O. W. camp after World War II. He had learned only elementary Russian in his college days and had never spoken it in Japan. But in the P. O. W. camp in Russia he was picked as an interpreter between the Japanese prisoners and the Russian military officers. He did the job so well and understood the Russian mentality that when he returned home to Japan he wrote and published a novel reporting the Russian camp life. Another example is also my personal acquaintance who had only junior high level English but, while a P. O. W. in Malaysia, developed an enduring friendship with some of the British soldiers.
environment, as American ESL students do. Therefore, for most students in Japan there is no real test of their English language ability in an actual situation.

Ever since the Fries oral approach was introduced after the war, aural-oral drills have been given much emphasis in junior high school TEFL programs. English teachers give pattern practice, substitution drills, minimal pair drills and so on, all in oral English. They think they are successful because their students respond very well in the classroom. But once they are out of the classroom, students and teachers alike speak Japanese for their mutual communication. How do they know their learned English skills lend themselves efficiently to real communication? So, after all, their aural-oral ability in English remains stored in the back of their mind.

Because it is hard to put the EFL aural-oral skills to real use for communication in Japanese environments, the only possible use of the language seems to be with the literate skills of reading and writing, and of the two, mainly with reading.

Reading has been the ultimate goal of TEFL in Japan. More than three quarters of the university and college entrance examination problems are in the area of reading. More than 90% of college English courses are reading courses. And we can witness some success in this area of TEFL programs. Most Japanese intellectuals and professionals like lawyers, doctors, professors, economists, businessmen, engineers, etc., subscribe to some English journals and periodicals published internationally. They read them and keep abreast of the times as far as the respective field of their speciality is concerned.

There is a grave problem, however, in EFL reading in Japan. The problem concerns itself with the definition of reading: what is
meant by reading EFL? Generally speaking, it is equivalent to translation in terms of the classroom activity, the kind of college and university entrance examination and to a certain degree the habit of Japanese readers of EFL. Reading with direct association, which is the proper meaning of the term "reading," is almost forgotten and reading EFL is generally taken and experienced as something indirect, something that must be reached through the native language.

One consequence of Japanese students' heavy dependence on translation in EFL reading is slowness in reading. For example, a university economics student may spend a good hour before he is through with an Economist (weekly, published in Britain) article of three pages and he can be considered an efficient reader of EFL. If the article were written in the student's native language, it would take only ten to thirty minutes depending on circumstances.

For the student to reach the correct meaning of his reading through translation, he must rearrange the word order because English syntax is entirely different from Japanese syntax. This makes rigorous demands upon the student's mental energy. He will soon be exhausted and stop reading.

Another factor in reading through translation that makes understanding difficult is the fact that because the English syntax is dissected in the reader's mind, each word ceases functioning properly in its syntactical place, so that the meaning of a new word must be supplied by the English-Japanese dictionary rather than by inference from the English syntactical context.

This causes students to depend heavily upon the English-Japanese bilingual dictionary. Also this results in fostering the wrong attitude among Japanese students that if a student can tell the dictionary-defined meaning of an English word he knows the word. English words tend to be studied individually and independently from sentential
In the worst case, students occupy themselves with futile efforts of memorizing the dictionary meanings of English words in their alphabetical order. There are a lot of English vocabulary books published in Japan for this very purpose and there are lots of high school students who buy them and try to prepare themselves for the college and university entrance examinations by learning the vocabulary by heart. It is a sheer waste of time and energy.

III

It must be the case that reading a foreign language is a much more complicated process than reading one’s native language, and that the mechanism is not much clarified yet. We don’t know the mechanism very well because up to now reading research has been mainly in the native language.

It may be that the translation process in FL reading cannot be deleted for the earlier stage and that after spending a great deal of time and energy on this level a student is able to advance to the proficient level of reading with direct association. Yoshikazu Ito proposes the following models of FL reading in contrast with those of NL (native language) reading.

It is apparent that the NL reading models are Kenneth Goodman's. But the FL reading models are Ito's. The comparison of the two clarifies some important points about the process of FL reading.

Chart (1) shows that for the processing of NL reading, there is oral language well formed in the mind of the reader that helps him decode into meaning. In contrast to this, there does not exist oral language in the mind of the FL reader. Therefore, he must rely on what few words and sentence patterns he has already learned for decoding.

Chart (2) makes it clear that the translation process in the place of oral language for decoding in reading FL is what makes FL reading

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entirely different than NL reading. Translation process is complex and involves analysis, substitution, comparison, selection, inference, and other thinking processes. The complexity is yet to be clarified.

The translation process in Proficiency Level II is different from the ideal translation model in chart (5). The former is mediation, while the latter is direct decoding.

Chart (3) and (4) show that on the most proficient level the reader takes meaning directly in either language.

There seems to be a great gap between Proficiency Level II and Level III. Most Japanese students are struggling on Level II. If the translation process before decoding in Chart (2) Proficiency Level II is elucidated, the burden will be made light.

At present, some studies and experiments suggest ways to facilitate bringing readers of Proficiency Level II on to Level III. The following suggestions, among others, are practical and practicable and will be most helpful to Japanese students.

1) Vocabulary should be learned only in a context because a word has no meaning but a potential of meanings unless it is applied in a specific situation.

2) Reading by structure rather than by word. Syntactical cues to meaning should be fully utilized.

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2. Ted Plaister, “Reading Instruction for College Level Foreign Student,” TESOL Quarterly Sep. 1968


4. Fry recommends easy reading for the development of guessing ability and classifies readings by the ratio of new words to familiar words as follows:
The skill of sensible guessing should be developed from grammatical and pragmatic context through easy readings with controlled vocabulary. The ratio of new words to familiar words must be less than one to twenty.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Unknown Words</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Basic Level</strong> (easy reading: student can read by himself for pleasure)</td>
<td>Fewer than 1 out of 20.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instruction Level</strong> (work and study level: some help from teacher needed)</td>
<td>About 1 out of 20.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frustration Level</strong> (too many new words: student quickly tires, gives up reading)</td>
<td>2 or more out of 20.</td>
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Japanese students are also advised to develop the skill of skimming and reading for information.

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1 On this point Goodman’s idea of reading as a psycholinguistic guessing game is suggestive. “Efficient reading does not result from precise perception and identification of all elements, but from skill in selecting the fewest, most productive cues necessary to produce guesses which are right the first time.” Kenneth Goodman, “Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game” in Doris Gunderson (ed), *Language and Reading: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. (Washington, D. C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1970.)