

## **Working with Local Teachers to Improve Reading Instruction: To What Extent can we Teach Reading Strategies and Skills in Iwate Schools?**

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### **0. Message to the Reader**

I have decided to break with the traditional discourse of academic writing for this paper. Recently, I read a book by Kenneth J. Gergen (2001) called "An Invitation to Social Construction." Social construction is the study of the ways social reality and social phenomena are *constructed*. In other words, it looks at the ways a social rule is created and converted to tradition by humans. Lets take empirical research as an example. Empirical research is a process of inquiry that relies on or is derived from observation or experiment. Gergen writes that one of the aims of the empirical researcher is to remain dispassionate in order to reflect the world as it is. That is, we understand our environment by separating ourselves from it. Gergen (p.91) openly questions this practice:

What is it for professionals to inform the world that we know most about each other when we care the least, when we are cool and distant? Is this a good model for relations with each other?

I too find it strange that in areas of human science, writers are discouraged from revealing their own human natures. For this paper, I will be referring to myself in the first person and show myself not as the android observer but as a member of the community of English teachers in Iwate that I am writing about. Am I biased? Yes I am. However, we human beings are all biased in one way or another (See Tiedt & Tiedt, 2001, p.27). It is important for us to recognize the biases we and other people operate from and to decide for ourselves what we think to be right and wrong. With this admission, I invite you to read my paper.

### **1. Background Information and Research Questions:**

For 3 days in January of 2004, I participated in an Intensive English Seminar for Iwate Japanese Teachers of English (JTLs) and Assistant English Teachers (ALTs). The seminar is held several times a year and supervised by the Iwate Prefecture Board of Education. Thirty-two JTLs and 16 ALTs throughout Iwate were randomly selected to attend the week-long seminar. All 16 ALTs were stationed at high schools while half the JTLs taught at junior high schools and the other half at high schools. The seminar was primarily a training

session for the JTLs with the ALTs there to provide support. Participants were housed in a dorm and attended workshops about English education every day. The workshops were held in English and were more student-centered than lecture oriented. The environment was reminiscent of a camp.

This seminar was part of the “Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities,” which is the brain child of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Monbukagusho, website). In an open forum sponsored by the Daily Yomiuri at the 29<sup>th</sup> Annual JALT International Conference, I had the opportunity to learn about this action plan in detail. By the year 2008, the plan’s goals are for high school graduates to be able to communicate in English and university graduates to be able to use English competently in the work place (Daily Yomiuri, JALT Open Forum handout). Among its plans to accomplish these goals is to improve English lessons, teacher training and the English ability of teachers.

To improve English lessons, Monbukagakusho plans to increase the number of activities making use of English in the classroom and have the majority of English classes conducted in the target language. To make these classes a reality, the Action Plan aims to raise the target language ability of English teachers, so that they can conduct classes primarily in English. Furthermore, it wants them to learn the communicative teaching techniques necessary to conduct activities using English in the classroom. One of the ways it plans to accomplish this is to send teachers to an intensive training seminar such as the one I participated in.

At the seminar, I was assigned to teach three workshops: one workshop on how to teach grammar, a second on how to teach reading, and a third on a topic of my choosing. I was particularly interested in local teachers’ opinions on reading instruction and on the possible conflict of reading instruction with Monbukagakusho’s action plan. As noted by Gorsuch (1998, 2001), *yakudoku*, or reading instruction with a strong emphasis on translating the English text to Japanese, is the dominant form of instruction in most Japanese schools, particularly high schools. Gorsuch elaborates that *yakudoku* “constitutes a potential impediment to teachers’ acceptance of communicative activities, and thus, the policies of Japanese educational authorities. (2001, web document)” Thus, I was curious to what extent local English teachers are focusing on developing reading skills in their classroom, and whether they thought that reading instruction focusing on skills was possible at their respective schools.

## 2. Challenges in teaching the reading seminar

The word intensive is a very appropriate word to describe the seminar. Each day I gave a total of 2 workshops to 2 groups of participants consisting of 16 JTLs and 8 ALTs each. Each workshop lasted 3 hours for a total of 6 hours a day. The first day, I conducted a reading workshop, the second day I conducted a grammar teaching workshop, and the third day we had 2 debates about effective ways to teach grammar and effective ways to teach reading.

This was my second time participating in this seminar. The first time, I had taught for a span of two days but this time, I was asked to teach 3 days. Despite the added work, I was happy to have the extra time. Why? Because up until that point I had been wondering "How in the world can we learn everything there is to know about teaching something as complex as reading in a 3-hour workshop?" As reading researchers William Grabe and Frericka L. Stoller write:

The ability to read is a remarkable type of expertise that most humans develop; it is not generally understood nor is its development widely recognized for the significant cognitive achievement that it is. (2002, p.2)

Thus, one of the challenges in teaching about reading instruction was the limited time to teach a complex phenomenon, reading, that is not understood completely. Furthermore, there is such a variety of language learning contexts in which reading instruction is conducted that "no set of research findings can be presumed to apply equally to all of them (Grabe & Stoller, 2002, p.67)." Therefore, we had to be wary that there was no guarantee the techniques we learned would be of any use to us. I realized that we would need time to consider 1) what reading is and the different skills necessary to be a good L2 reader and 2) whether the techniques learned in the workshop could somehow be relevant to our respective teaching contexts. So I welcomed the extra day provided to us.

Another challenge faced was the circumstance in which the seminar was being held. First, I would like to make it clear that I think the intentions of the local board of education and Monbukagakusho are commendable. The chance for local English educators to mingle with colleagues and native speakers of the target language, exchange ideas, learn new techniques, and practice their English for a week was unquestionably an extraordinary opportunity. Linda Shalaway (1997) writes that:

Research surveys have revealed that professional development and expanded career opportunities mean more to teachers than increased salaries or improved

working conditions. (p.281)

Although the organizers' intentions were commendable, an inherent problem in achieving the intended result was that the participants knew they were part of the problem that the seminar was intended to address. This, of course, put them in an awkward position. I could understand how this kind of situation might make a JTL feel self-conscious about speaking English in front of his colleagues or sharing his teaching ideas. If he made a mistake in English or talked about a technique other teachers did not like, maybe he would be seen as part of the problem.

### **3. The Curriculum of the Seminar**

Overall, the goal of the reading workshop was for all the participants, including me, to think about what kind of abilities reading entailed and what techniques we can use to help our students develop these abilities. To accomplish this goal, we would learn about reading skills and strategies as well as participate in and create lessons which focus on these strategies. Given the complexity of reading and the variety of contexts we teach in, I realized that we could not find the answers to these problems in one workshop but I was hoping that the seminar would get us started in finding these answers.

#### **3.1 Pleasure Reading**

The workshop started with 10 minutes of pleasure reading followed by true and false questions and two kinds of reading aloud activities: shadowing and popcorn reading. The reading was an amusing story written by an Argentine salary man living in Tokyo about his experience at his first Japanese wedding (See Vogel, 2003). I gave a time limit and true and false questions because I wanted participants to experience a reading activity in which they must read a large passage for the gist in a limited time. This process is called skimming, and we do it quite often when we read in our first language. I also wanted to emphasize that one of the ways we learn to read is simply by reading:

Students learn to read by reading a lot yet reading a lot is not the focus of most curricula (Grabe & Stoller, 2002, p. 91).

#### **3.2 Mini-reading lesson**

The second activity was a mini-reading lesson consisting of a pre-reading, during-reading and a post-reading activity. For the main activity, I read aloud the children's book "Leo the

Late Bloomer,” by Robert Kraus. The story is about a shy boy tiger, Leo, who is slow to grow up but eventually succeeds. As a pre-reading activity, to activate our prior knowledge we wrote a cinquain or a 5 lined poem that reflects “affective and cognitive responses to a concept (Farrell 2002, p.26).” For an example of a cinquain please see Appendix 1. The theme for our cinquains was “Me (at 13 years old).” The purpose of this theme was to reflect on how we were when we were Leo’s age so we could sympathize with the character. For the during-reading activity, I read the story aloud, and in the post-reading activity, we wrote a dialogue journal in pairs. For the dialogue journals, participants initially wrote their reactions to the story on a piece of paper, and I then asked them to exchange their papers with their partners. The partners then wrote responses about each other’s initial reactions and exchanged papers. The pairs continued to exchange responses for a few minutes. The dialogue journal is a method to help learners who usually do not like to express their opinions to other people to do so, and a way for learners to practice writing for communication. It is also a method to reflect on the reading. The purpose of this mini -lesson was to introduce the Pre-, During-, and Post- Reading Framework for teaching reading advocated by Stoller and Grabe (2001).

### **3.3 Why do we read?**

After the two reading activities I emphasized the fact that in our first language we rarely read for no reason at all; we always have a reason to read whether it be for information (maps, encyclopedia, menus etc.) or pleasure (novels, comics, the sports pages, etc.). In English class, when we tell our students to open their books to page 46 and immediately start reading that page, students are neither reading for pleasure nor for information. This is not very authentic and I wanted to emphasize the importance of giving students a *reason* to read.

### **3.4 How do we read?**

Next, we examined three popular models for reading which include the top-down model, the bottom up model, and interactive reading model (See Farrell, 2002, pp.1 -6). Grabe & Stoller say that as an initiation into learning about reading comprehension these models are useful, but that they do not completely reflect current research in reading (2002, p.31). By introducing these three models I wanted to emphasize that to extract meaning from text we rely on both top-down skills, such as using background knowledge, and bottom-up skills, such as instantaneous word recognition and knowledge of sentence structure.

### **3.5 What skills do we use when we read?**

After discussing how we read, I introduced the following skills that we use for reading (Ediger, 2001, p.154): 1. Automatic recognition skills, 2. Vocabulary and structural knowledge, 3. Formal discourse structure knowledge, 4. Knowledge of information, 5. Evaluation skills, 6. Metacognitive knowledge and skills monitoring. We also considered which of these skills might be considered top-down and which could be considered bottom-up.

### **3.6 What strategies do we use when we read?**

Lastly, we discussed what kind of strategies we use when we read. I introduced the following strategies that can be taught (Farrell, 2002, pp. 22 -23): 1. Skimming, 2. Scanning, 3. Extensive Reading, 4. Intensive Reading, 5. Guessing the Meaning of Words, 6. Activating Prior Knowledge, 7. Recognizing Text Types, 8. Identifying Topics and Main Ideas. We also tried different activities designed to teach the different strategies.

### **3.7 Designing reading lessons**

For the reading lessons, participants were to design a lesson focusing on teaching a particular reading skill or strategy using authentic materials. When I taught this seminar for the first time in the morning, I hurried the group through the reading activities, skipping some tasks that were designed to have us reflect on how we use strategies in reading, so that we would have time to prepare reading lessons in work groups. The end result was that we were not able to digest all the information I had gathered for the workshop. Although the work groups completed their reading exercises, we did not have enough time to present them to each other. As a result, they presented their reading lessons during the second day. With the afternoon group, I abandoned the preparation of a reading lesson so that the participants could instead learn about the different skills and strategies necessary for reading at a more relaxed pace. I regretted that the afternoon group did not plan reading lessons and realized that I should reduce some of the content of the workshop to afford participants the opportunity to create their own lessons.

## **4. Participants' thoughts about focusing on reading skills or strategies rather than translation.**

In the workshop following the reading seminar, both the morning and afternoon groups had a debate in class as to whether English teachers should focus on teaching reading skills

and strategies in the class or focus on translation. Before the debate, the participants had formed teams with one team taking the position of skills/strategies and the other the position of translation. Participants argued for their side irrespective of their true stance. In each workshop of 24 educators, a total of 12 participated in the debate and the other 12 voted as to who they thought had the strongest argument. In the first workshop, those who watched the debate were divided as to who had the most convincing argument and in the second workshop the skills/strategy side edged the translation side 7 – 5. After each debate, participants filled out a questionnaire as to which approach they thought was best for their schools. Since the morning group had composed practice reading lessons and the afternoon group had not, the questionnaires for the two groups differed. Below are the questions that each group was asked:

**Table 1** Questions given to educators in the morning and afternoon groups after the reading debate.

	<b>Morning Group</b>	<b>Afternoon Group</b>
1	Which method (skill strategy or translation) do you feel is best for your situation at your school? Why?	
2	Make a list of your own principles for teaching a reading class.	When would it be possible for you to teach reading skills at your school?
3	Are the principles you listed consistent or inconsistent with the lesson plan you made on Tuesday?	When is it best for you to use translation at your school?

I will primarily analyze participants' responses to question 1. Below are the participants' most common types of responses.

**Table 2.** Participants' answers to Question 1.

Reasons why reading instruction focusing on skills and strategies can be practiced at my school.	Reasons why reading instruction focusing on translation can be practiced at my school.
Skills and strategies are useful for doing well on entrance exams.	Students are accustomed to translation.
It is important to learn to understand the general idea of a passage.	Students' levels are low.
Students get bored of translation easily.	It is important that students understand the text.
My students are of a very high level and already know how to translate.	Students can only overcome the linguistic differences between Japanese and English and learn to read through translation.
It is important for students to learn to read unassisted.	Translation is a kind of reading skill.
Students need good reading skills to be good translators.	
Depends on the case	
The two cannot be separated	

#### 4.1 Why participants felt the reading skill/strategy approach would work at their schools:

Gorsuch (2001) wrote that entrance examinations, in addition to *yakudoku*, are an impediment to teaching communicative English. Thus, I was struck by the number of local educators who wrote that reading skills and strategies would be useful for students who have to take University entrance examinations. The response of a participant below represents this point of view:

I would like to teach reading skills to the third year students who will go to university, because they have to solve the problems very quickly for the entrance exam.

As skills and strategies are supposed to promote reading for meaning in the target language, I think that they correspond with teaching English for communicative purposes (as long as students are using what they have read for communicative purposes). Although we have always thought of entrance examinations as the enemy of communicative English, these results indicate that they actually could benefit it by encouraging teachers to teach reading skills and strategies.

There were also quite a few educators who thought that the skill/strategy approach would be the best for their settings because it was acceptable to understand the gist of a passage rather than every word. The response below represents this point of view:

I think teaching skill/strategies is the best because it is important to know the outline or contents. If we focus on translation then students will be bored and want to stop learning English.

Like the participant above, some teachers wrote that translation would bore the students and the skill/strategy approach would be more enjoyable for their students:

... students get tired with translation. Reading skill/strategy can teach the students to read English is fun.

There were a few teachers who wrote that their students were at a high level and already had a deep enough understanding of English grammar that the skill/strategy approach was more desirable. Lastly, some of the participants thought that students were more likely to learn to read by themselves with a skill/strategy approach:

If students understand the reading skill strategy, after they can read anything they want to read by themselves. They can do it alone, by themselves, I think.

#### **4.2 Why participants felt the translation approach would work at their schools:**

One of the predominant reasons participants gave as to why reading instruction focusing on translation should be practiced at their schools was that students are accustomed to translation. However, many of these participants did not feel that translation alone was sufficient:

While we would all probably like to avoid translation completely, I think it is inevitable that the students will translate. I think the best thing is to give the students skills that encourage them not to depend on translation.

Another common answer was that students' proficiency levels were too low for a skill/strategy approach to be effective as expressed by the following two responses:

Translation is good at my school because students are at a lower level. They like translation because they can understand.

At my school students are not good at English. I think reading skill/strategy is

good for advanced students

The participants above raise an important issue regarding how much of the L2 do students need to know before they can start using reading strategies. Grabe & Stoller (2002) write that “students must have a sufficient knowledge (i.e. vocabulary, grammar, and discourse) to make effective use of skills and strategies that are part of their L1 reading comprehension skills. (p.50)” This theory is called *Language Threshold*. When students encounter a text with many unfamiliar words and phrases, they have to focus most of their attention on them rather than on the overall meaning of the text. Whether learners are able to read an L2 depends to a great extent on how familiar students are with either the topic or the words and phrases in a text. Thus, the problem that local teachers face is that a given page in the textbook might contain so many unknown words and phrases that skills and strategies alone are too overwhelming:

I think translation is better because if I teach skills students don't understand the meaning. All reading materials have meaning, if we don't care about that and just teach skills, I can't teach them to understand the reading materials deeply.

Many of the teachers who advocated the translation approach or both approaches discussed how emphasizing the use of skills and strategies alone will not help understand the meaning of a passage. Thus, one participant wrote translation should be used as a tool for understanding the target language not as an end in itself.

The participant who wrote the above response also expressed his opinion that translation is a kind of reading skill. This opinion was shared by many of the other participants. Why? In order for us to be good L2 readers we have to understand sentence structure, grammar, and vocabulary, and these abilities are also essential for translation.

## 5. Conclusion

Many of the teachers in the morning group indicated in question 2 of the questionnaire that they were already teaching reading skills and strategies, and a majority of the teachers wrote that they were willing to use the skill/strategy approach in some form. This could be an indication that *yakudoku* is not the only method for teaching reading in Japan. Furthermore, as many teachers thought that the skill/strategy approach would be useful in preparing students for university entrance exams, it is possible that the approach does have promise in Japan. If

the questions in the reading section of the entrance examinations were in English rather than Japanese, I think there would be an even stronger incentive to emphasize the reading skill/strategy approach over the translation approach.

This study also made it clear that a combination of the skill/strategy and translation approach is optimal. Given that students do not meet the *Language Threshold* in many instances, supplementary information in Japanese is essential. However, as participants also indicated, translation alone is boring, and students will not learn to read for themselves.

For my reading workshop, I think that I might have provided too much information to the participants in one session and should have afforded them more time to digest the content. The next time I teach the reading seminar, I will ensure that participants have enough time to create and present their own reading lessons. However, if this seminar was successful in helping the participants think about how they could improve their reading instruction then it will have been of some use.

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### Appendix 1 – An Example of a Cinquain

How to Make a Cinquain	An Example
Line 1 = A one word title	Me (At 13 years-old)
Line 2 = Two words that describe the title	Introverted, Quiet
Line 3 = Three words expressing an action	Bounding, Playing, Enjoying
Line 4 = Four words expressing a feeling	Joyful, Comfortable, Romantic, Curious
Line 5 = Another word for the title.	Innocent

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