

The Reading Matrix
Vol.2, No.3, September 2002

THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN COLLEGE EFL READING CLASSES IN JAPAN

Toshiyuki Takagaki

E-mail: ttakagaki@hotmail.com

Abstract

This article describes the results of a questionnaire which reveals Japanese students' attitudes towards reading in English versus reading in Japan. More specially, the article points out how students may have distorted views about English and English texts because of their limited exposure to literary texts. The article emphasizes the importance of incorporating literature in English reading courses in Japan so that students can better understand and develop an appreciation for English.

Introduction

English functions as an international communication tool and is widely used in a number of settings by both native and non-native speakers of English. Most notably, English is used extensively on the Internet nowadays. English as an international communication tool has had some impact on the teaching of college English reading in Japan. Specifically, more and more emphasis is placed on English reading for the purpose of accessing and obtaining up-to-date information shared in the world.

In Japan, college English reading courses were generally literature-based, mainly because those classes were taught by professors with literature backgrounds. But due to the utilitarian view of the English language, reading such materials as newspapers and academic articles are becoming increasingly popular over literature. For example, Suzuki (1975) claims that we should exclude literature in college English.

As an educator in Japan, I have been bothered by the overemphasis on English reading for gaining factual information because there is a danger that students may form one-sided view of the English language by being exposed to a specific register of writing or discourse style. With such limited exposure to English texts, the language may be perceived as a somewhat lifeless, dry tool to obtain information. Certainly English is an extremely rich language and can convey love, despair, joy, anger, pity and agony as much as it can express cold hard facts and academic discourse.

I believe the reading of literature has a vital role to play in teaching foreign language readers that it is a living, rich language and that literary works such as novels, poems, dramas, and short stories are full of feelings and emotions, along with imagination and creativity. Before exploring the issue of literature and reading further, I would like to examine how difficult it is for students in Japan to see English as a lively language by comparing attitudes toward reading in Japanese with reading in English. The aim of this

article is to provide some insight on how English texts and reading in English is perceived by a group of Japanese students.

Reading in Japanese and in English

Method

English is a foreign language in Japan and, consequently, the need to communicate in English is rare. In fact, students do not have to engage in reading and writing in English in their daily life. In this kind of environment, reading in English becomes much more foreign than reading in the context of ESL in which people have easier access to English. I believe this *foreignness* in the EFL context helps make people feel that English, as well as any other foreign language, is a lifeless linguistic system.

To find out how alien English is for Japanese students, a survey adapted from Atwell's 'reading survey' (1998, p. 495) was administered to 98 college students in first and second-year English classes in June, 2000. Their majors included Japanese literature, economics, and nursing.

The questionnaire asked nine questions about reading attitudes when they read in Japanese and nine questions about reading attitudes when they read in English. All the questions were the same for Japanese and English reading, and were presented in Japanese.

Findings

Q.1. How many books would you say there are in your house?

The number of Japanese books ranged from 0 to 1000, and the average number of books they have is 86. On the other hand, the number of English books varied from zero to 200. The average number of English books the students have is 7.5.

Q2. How did you learn to read?

Sixty-two percent of the students answered that they learned to read in Japanese either at home or at elementary school. Twenty-four percent of the students also said they learned naturally. Regarding English, 60 percent of the students learned to read as a school subject in junior high school.

Q3. Why do people read? List as many reasons as you can think of.

A variety of responses were provided by the students for Japanese reading. The responses include: "To deepen and enlarge world knowledge"; "to explore his or her interest"; "to hear other people's opinions"; "to strengthen imagination"; "to relax"; "to enjoy the story"; "to escape from the reality"; "to kill time"; and "just to have fun."

In contrast, 34 percent of the students did not write any responses or just wrote "I don't know" concerning English reading. Interestingly, among the few responses given were all related to studying as follows: "To improve English ability"; "to understand English better"; "to pass the tests"; and "to meet class requirement." One student also mentioned that people read English because of globalization.

Q.4. What does someone have to do or know in order to be a good reader?

There were a variety of responses in terms of Japanese reading as follows: "To concentrate"; "to know

the meanings of words”; “to know what kind of books are available”; “not to follow public opinion on a specific books”; “to read with interest”; “to take good care of books”; “to read cover to cover”; and “to read many books.”

When it comes to English reading, 33 percent of the students either left this question blank or marked “I don’t know.” But those who responded all stated something about the language, such as grammar knowledge, vocabulary, and culture of the language.

Q.5. What kinds of books do you like to read?

Almost all the major genres were presented by the students for reading in Japanese. Those genres included mystery, fantasy, science fiction, history, and romance. On the contrary, for reading in English, half of the students (51%) left this question unanswered. Those who responded wrote that they liked to read easy books, books with many pictures, books they know the plot of such as fairy tales and Disney books.

Q.6. How do you decide which books you will read?

Students choose Japanese books based on the following information: “Writer”; “book reviews”; “best sellers”; “illustration”; “plot on the book cover”; “title”; “friends’ recommendation”; “letter size”; and “the number of pages.”

In deciding English books, 59 percent of the students responded and their responses included: “Famous work”; “easy one to read”; and “advice from teachers and friends.” One student also stated that she never read English books except textbooks which were required.

Q.7. Who are your favorite authors?

Sixty percent of the students came up with one or two well-known Japanese writers, such as Banana Yoshimoto, Shinichi Hoshi, Kappa Seno, Ryotaro Shiba, and Momoko Sakura.

In contrast, a limited number of students (14%) have their favorite authors for English books. Such authors as Sydney Sheldon, Agatha Christie, and Shakespeare were mentioned, but it is not clear whether they read them in English or a translation.

Q.8. Have you ever reread a book? If so, can you name it/them?

Only 45 percent of the students reread Japanese books. Among those who read listed such books as *Natsu no niwa* [*Summer garden*], and *Futari* [*Two sisters*]. One student commented that she reread all the books she read. When it comes to English, few had engaged in a second reading.

Q.9. In general, how do you feel about reading?

The following are positive comments given for reading in Japanese: “Normal activity”; “good thing”; “good for the development of reading skills”; “enriching imagination”; “enlarging knowledge”; “hobby”; “self-enrichment”; “good way to learn *kanji*”; “having a leisure time”; “interesting”; and “better than watching TV.” Negative comments include: “Dark and quiet”; “not interesting”; and “tiring.”

With respect to English reading, although 38 percent of the students left the question blank, the following responses were elicited: “Wish I could read”; “my English is not good enough to enjoy reading”; “good thing”; “to experience a foreign culture”; “I read for the test”; “to improve my English”; “difficult”;

and “necessary.”

Analysis

Qualitative results of the questionnaires revealed that responses for Japanese reading were much more detailed and elaborate than those for English reading. For instance, one student, in response to how you learned to read (Q.4), wrote “I think I learned how to read in Japanese in elementary school, but I think it was around my kindergarten years when I started to do basic reading, like understanding letters and stories.” But the same student answered simply “At school.” for reading in English. There were also many students who simply left the questions unanswered or wrote “I don’t know” for English reading.

Close examination of the findings suggests that reading in Japanese is deeply rooted in their daily life. Simply, the number of books they have at home (Q.1), the number of genres they read (Q.5), the number of favorite writers (Q.7), and the number of books they reread (Q.8) are in striking contrast to English reading. For instance, the students have 86 Japanese books while they have only 7.5 English books in average (Q.1). Also, the comments in Q.3 and Q.9 in general are centered around two key concepts for reading in Japanese; self-improvement and pleasure. In Q.3, such responses as “to deepen and enlarge world knowledge” and “to strengthen imagination” indicate self-improvement, and responses like “to explore his or her interest” and “to relax” indicate personal pleasure. Likewise, in Q.9, comments like “good for the development of reading skills” and “good way to learn *kanji*” are related to self-improvement, and responses like “hobby” and “having a leisure time” are related to personal pleasure.

On the other hand, the students’ responses to reading in English suggest that it is basically regarded as a school subject as seen in responses to Q.2, Q.3, Q.4, and Q.9. Responses to Q.4 and Q.9 indicate the difficulty of the language. Q.4 found that a good reader has to know, for instance, “grammar knowledge,” “vocabulary” and “culture of the language.” Q.9 found such comments as “Wish I could read” and “My English is not good enough to enjoy reading” in response to how they feel about reading in English. Furthermore, the *foreignness* of English is revealed in responses to Q.5, Q.6, Q.7, and Q.8 in that most students either left the questions unanswered or wrote “I don’t know.” In short, English is a school subject, which is difficult and foreign.

The survey, though far from exhaustive, shows the clear gap between reading in a native language and foreign language. One of the important findings is that reading in Japanese is associated with a view of reading as self-improvement and pleasure while reading in English is associated with a view of reading as a school subject. Interestingly, this finding parallels Bondy’s (1990) finding on children’s L1 reading that good readers defined reading as a personally meaningful activity and poor readers defined reading as required work. According to Bondy, prior knowledge about reading and the reading experiences in the classroom play an important role in constructing a view of reading. Similarly, the present data suggests that reading in a foreign language is perceived as being more limited than reading in a native language in terms of prior knowledge of reading and the reading experiences, result in different views of reading for Japanese and English. Furthermore, the finding that English reading is not related to personally meaningful activities

implies that Japanese students are likely to see English as a lifeless language, especially when they are exposed to only certain kinds of texts, specifically those which inform or present facts.

Literature and reading

Fu (1995) recalls her experience taking literature courses and reading courses at a graduate school in the United States. Her literature classes dealt with such topics as symbolism, romanticism, imagery, elements of literature, the structure of texts, and the language and tone of text, but “a text was discussed as if it had nothing to do with the real world and people” (p. 4). In her reading courses, in contrast, they “shared [their] understanding and feelings about the reading, and made connections between the world in the text and real life” (p. 7).

There are two views of reading (Smith, 1994). One stance is that reading is seen as a skill with a number of isolated subskills that can be taught in isolation. This view includes such exercises as identifying the author’s main idea, noting relationships between ideas, or identifying and understanding paragraph organization. The other stance, whole language, treats reading as a process of constructing meaning rather than decoding or comprehending. Arguing for the latter position, Henry (1995) claims that “the important question to ask students about their reading is not whether they circled the right answer but whether what they read was meaningful” (p. 136).

Recent L2 reading research shows that extensive reading helps improve students’ L2 language proficiency by focusing on the overall meaning of the text, rather than on linguistic aspects of the texts (Day & Bamford, 1998). This reading-for -meaning can be divided into two categories, one is efferent reading and the other is aesthetic reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). The former type of reading aims at gaining information in a text, while the latter type aims at enjoying the experience of reading. Though these two reading positions are not mutually exclusive, efferent reading can be beneficial when students read such materials as newspapers and academic articles, while aesthetic reading can be more suited for reading literature.

In order for Japanese students to develop a more positive attitude toward English, what we can learn from both L1 and L2 reading research is that we do not want to teach English literature as Fu experienced it, that is as a detachment between text and the human experience. Secondly, English reading should be meaningful for students so that reading does not simply mean language decoding activities and mechanical drills. In other words, by incorporating more literature in the classroom and by using and analyzing it effectively, I believe students can avoid having a distorted image of English. McKay (1982) maintains that the aesthetic reading of literature increases student motivation and further develops reading proficiency. Extensive reading research substantiates this claim because extensive reading, which is focused on aesthetic reading, has been proved to improve learners’ L2 proficiency, as well as build positive attitudes toward reading (Day & Bamford, 1998). This aesthetic reading of literature, in my opinion, can enable Japanese students to see English as an equally rich language.

Conclusion

Finally, I would like to touch upon some key teaching issues, which should be also applicable to teaching contexts similar to Japan.

First, we should decide what kind of literature is appropriate. Needless to say, many factors such as proficiency level, student needs and interests determine this. As McKay (1982) claims, reading texts may come from simplified versions of existing texts, or young adult literature. Furthermore, she suggests we use literature which is familiar to students in terms of culture and themes.

Relevant to the familiarity of the literature, in addition to British or American literature, there are many people who write literature in English, although they come from non-English-speaking countries (Talib, 1992). For example, haiku is written and appreciated by both native and non-native speakers of English. It is also possible to choose literature written originally in the students' L1 but translated into English. A wide variety of texts can result in a deeper appreciation of literary works.

It is also important to give students a chance to select own texts. Each student has different preferences depending on their background, their level of maturity, and L2 proficiency level. For instance, in a year when a certain novel has been made into a popular movie, some students might like to read that novel. Therefore, with the leadership of English teachers, school libraries should make an effort to collect a wide variety of literary works, so that eventually students can learn to select their own books (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Aesthetic reading can be also beneficial to writing (Spack, 1985), and speaking (Gajudusek, 1988; Tomlinson, 1998). Students can write about and discuss the topic before and after reading. For example, students can engage in a free writing activity about the topic they are going to read; they can keep a journal about the book they are reading; they can write book reports and present them orally. The possibilities are endless. In other words, aesthetic reading can be used not only for reading classes but can be successfully incorporated into writing and speaking classes.

Last, but not the least, efferent reading in L2 has its own place and value in reading class. There is no doubt that reading for information is important, especially when we live in the information age. Thus, the balance between aesthetic and efferent reading in class should always be carefully considered.

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<p>Toshiyuki Takagaki is an associate professor of English at Onomichi University, Hiroshima. He earned his doctorate in English from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and has conducted research in Japan, the United States, and Canada. His current academic interests include biliteracy and bilingualism.</p>
