

Using Reading to Develop Japanese Learners Situation Models Of English Texts

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This paper details how some Japanese learners of English scaffold their way to expressing their views of graded reader texts based on each individual's situation model.

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The following is a description what goes on in a reading course that has a few objectives in mind. One of the tasks involved for the learners is to demonstrate to the teacher understanding of a text on three levels over three classes. Scaffolding the level of understanding in order for the learners to develop their own ideas about the text and share it with others. The model that underlies the pedagogical processes that are happening during class time was developed by Kintch. Frequent re-reading of the texts in class is necessary while a writing component is used to demonstrate to the teacher that understanding of the text has been achieved. The degree of understanding demonstrated of the texts is scaffolded with the first rung at a cursory level, next at rhetorical level and finally at the situation model level. The focus of the paper is what is occurring during the class time, and the pedagogical justification behind it. The paper will proceed as follows; a brief review of the theoretical models mentioned previously, the type of texts used in class, a teacher's perspective of what is happening during the class, acknowledgment of the limitations of this particular class regime. Let us briefly look at one model of text comprehension.

When a reader reads a text, an "understanding" of the text is created in the reader's mind. The process of constructing a situation model is called the comprehension process. Kintsch and van Dijk assume that readers of a text build three different mental representations of the text: a verbatim representation of the text, a semantic representation that describes the meaning of the text and a situational representation of the situation to which the text refers. The propositional representation consists initially of a list of propositions that are derived from the text. After having read a complete sentence, this list of propositions is transformed into a network of propositions. If the text is coherent, all nodes of the network are connected to each other. Having understood the basis of what reading comprehension is, let us now look at one representation of the rhetoric of a fictional story.

The rhetoric of a story is presented at the back of the in class textbook. In the back of the book, the following pattern is presented that the learners must learn and be able to identify in the story to ultimately be able to share their thoughts of the story. There are five basic parts to the fictional story's rhetoric; exposition, complication, rising action, climax and resolution. Let us look at these points in detail.

The exposition gives the background needed to understand the story. It tells who the characters are, where the story happens, and when it happens. The complication is the

single event which begins the conflict, or creates the problem. The event might be an action, a thought or even some of the words of the characters. The rising actions brings more event and difficulties. As the story moves through these events, the story becomes more interesting building to a climax. The climax is the high point of the story, the turning point, for good or for bad, in the lives of one or more of the characters. The resolution usually offers an answer to the conflict or problem, which results in a happy or sad ending for one or more of the characters. Mysteries are explained, secrets are revealed, and the reader can have a sense of closure to the whole ordeal. All of this is explained to the learners, and this basically overwhelms the learners. This is only at the beginning of the term, and through the year most learners are become quite proficient at identifying these five parts of the story. This concludes the theoretical model that underlies the pedagogical tasks the learners must perform. Let us look in detail of the types of texts used in the class.

The textbook is called Bookworms Club Bronze which presents fictional stories in a graded reader format. The concept of graded readers is a relatively new reading concept within the ESL world. The basic premise of a graded reader is to present texts that are originally written for native speakers in a much more simplified form. The degree of simplification is with respect to grammatical structures and the number of headwords. The same story is read by literature majors three times spread out over three weeks. The stories contain about 450 to 700 headwords. One class is held once a week for 90 minutes. What follows is a class description.

At the very beginning of the year, there is very little schema activation at the start of the class due to the themes of the story. There is very little schema recalling exercise or trying to activate prior knowledge due to the fact that these stories are chosen specifically so that most of the learners have never ever experienced nor thought about the information present in the texts. This is an opportunity to create new knowledge and help learners improve their situation model of the texts.

The first time the learners read the story alone for about 10 minutes without a dictionary. Unknown words and phrases are underlined; this is to remind the students how much they do understand on the page rather the natural tendency to focus on what they do not know. The process of underlining may highlight what initially the learner does not know but once learned, it shows the learner that vocabulary acquisition progress is being made. As a

teacher, I am making sure students are on task, ie not sleeping or using various electronic devices. The learner should be reading the text as many times as they can manage during the 10 minute period. This idea comes from the acronym DEAR meaning drop everything and read or another phrasing of the same idea sustained silent reading as noted by McCracken(1971). Higher proficient readers are able to read story at least once while some other learners are not able to completely read through the story.

After ten minutes, groups are formed and the students work on the comprehension questions that are at the end of each story with the aid of their dictionaries. After completing the comprehension questions as a group, I make the stipulation that everyone in the group must have the same answer before I will check the learners answers to see if the answers are factually and grammatically correct. Some of the questions require the learners to finish sentences in which the first have the sentence is written in the textbook. On the rare occasion that the group fails to agree on all the answers, then I become a judge hearing from the various learners, asking them for an explanation. This is the first of many communication dilemmas faced by the teacher and by the learners in the room.

The term false beginner originated in Japan with the nuance that the learners understand English in written form and very slow utterances, but they lack verbal communication competency despite the fact that these learners also take a once week oral communication class for 60 weeks spread out over a two year university calendar year. That aside, I make it a strict policy from the outset that all communications to me must be in English while I use English in turn at least three times before I revert to the explanation in Japanese.

Having checked the comprehension questions for both grammatical and factual correctness, the learners are then free to leave the room even if the 90 minutes has not elapsed. However, most learners require the full 90 minutes and sometimes they even need to work past ninety minutes. Only the higher proficient learners leave earlier than 90 minutes but those same learners often which to converse with the teacher for a few minutes in English before leaving the room. Also, before leaving the room I suggest to the learner that he may or may not wish to help the others in the group if they themselves request it.

The following week, the learners read the same story again for ten minutes without a dictionary. There are always one or two learners who were absent the previous week and are reading the story for the very first time. This automatically leads to a degree of

understanding between the learners and a gap is an opportunity for learning. The learners who were present become teachers helping those who are reading the story for the first time to try to understand the story better. Those same students still have to help the group with the next task in the next lesson.

After reading the exact same text as the previously scheduled lesson for ten minutes of sustained silent reading, the students then are given the task to summarize the story in about 12 sentences using one of the extra activity sheets in the back of the textbook. Most learners are able to read the story at least once while the higher proficient learners are able to read through the story twice. This gives the learners a chance to demonstrate their understanding of fictional rhetoric. The basic rhetoric of a story is exposition, complication, rising actions climax and a resolution. Exposition is the general background of the story, who the main characters are and what their relationship is to each other. The complication is when a conflict first occurs in the story. Rising actions are how the story progress to the climax while the resolution is the ultimate conclusion to the story.

The hard work for the learners is that they have to understand the story in quite some detail, to identify those five parts of the rhetoric and then the learners write those details in a coherent summary in English. This is accomplished by asking more detailed questions within the five sections. The level of detail necessary to answer the questions guides the learner groups to be able to write a coherent summary of the story. These detailed orientated questions lead to the conversations within the group to have a deeper understanding of the story. Now what is the justification for reading the same story twice let alone a future third time.

Most of us in our first language rarely read a story more than once. However, when asked to give an outline of the basic story, most of can give a basic outline of most of the fiction we have read but not necessarily give details unless something has really made an impression on us for one reason or another. Therefore, it is natural for learners to read it and forget it. Making the learners read the same story again helps them to remember.

On the third reading the least favored activity presents itself. The students have to read the story for a third time. Again, with attendance being spotty amongst many students some are reading the story for only the second or first time. Then the students then are given time to talk about the story in small groups for 15 minutes in English. Most learners find this

activity a chore with even some comments such as “Why do I have to talk, this is a reading class?” Most learners are not in this category but there are a few.

Those comment asides, the learners are always sitting groups with a maximum of 5 per group. Then from the textbook, particular role sheets are handed out to each member of the group with each member receiving a different role sheet. The role sheets are names in no particular order of importance; Discussion leader, Summarizer, Connector, Paragraph Person, Wordmaster and finally Cultural Collector. Each one of these role will now be explained in turn. Let’s start with the Discussion Leader.

The main purpose of this is to lead a discussion based on the story. The interesting thing that the learners frequently do is to ask display type questions. Answers that can only have one correct to. These are frequently comprehension type questions but that is not what I am asking of them. This is where the students lack of educational and cultural schema displays itself.

What I ask of them is not ask yes/no type or comprehension type questions but questions that are related to the story and are more open-ended in nature to facilitate a conversation. Suggestions from the book include, what the learners thought of the ending of the story, what themes can they identify, what they thought of the characters as being true to life or whether they know someone or how much of themselves they see in the character. This is the prompt that allows each individual situation model process the text. The summarizer unlike the discussion leader is quite easy given that the previous lesson the learners had to do a summary of the story but it is far from redundant. Most of the learners, like most people in general it can argued, forget the details of the story and the many times the previous week’s lesson content so it is just another chance at review.

The WordMaster is someone focusing on the individual words in the story. Writing down on their role sheets words used in new way, frequently repeated words, and /or important to the story is a great consciousness raising exercise which is quite difficult and challenging for most of the learners. Paragraph Person is the same thing just done at the paragraph level but allows the learner to express surprise, astonishment, shocking or even boring about various paragraphs in the story. The Culture Collector role is a comparison exercise where the learners have to think critically to recognize one cultural point that is same and one cultural point that is different compared to Japan. Finally, the Connector role is one where

the learner has to be compare things that are quite different in their life and what is the same in their life to that of the story they read.

From their initial groups of 5, the learners are assigned a one role each and they rotate through the roles. For example, with one story, a person could be a discussion leader, but three weeks later, they could take on the Connector role. The goal is to attempt to go through each of these roles but with a different text in the discussion group. The reason being is that these same sheets are used in their final evaluation in which the learners have to write a report on one story but using all five role sheets. This re-enforces the idea that attendance in class is critical to be able to complete the read to write task which is the term ending report. Therefore, this style rewards the people who attend class on a regular basis.

Once the learners have their schedule as to what is their role should be, they separate from their original groups and find their particular role sheet. They work with other learners who were assigned the same role sheet from their own group. So,, you will have, on an ideal day, 5 people per group all working on the same role sheet. Once completed after usually 45 minutes, they return to their original group with their role sheets in hand ready to talk.

This reading to express their own situation model of the story is the part of the class that low proficient learners hate the most and higher proficient learners enjoy. Very little correction is done on grammar, just the teacher walking around the room listening in , making sure the learners are participating, giving encouragement. The one rule which some view as quite strict is the no Japanese policy. The learners have a choice as to sit in silence for 15 minutes after having read aloud their role sheet or try to continue the conversation. Very little correction is done in order not to de-motivate the learners from speaking.

Throughout the class, I am not speaking very much. I am not at the front of the room explaining what the story means, no word bi-lingual word lists are given. I constantly monitor the work of the learners to stay on task only. Correction of grammar and word choice are done with me walking around to each group and doing it on a needs basis. Also, positive re-enforcement is given by acknowledging that when the learners have written a grammatically and factually correct answer with positive words of encouragement such “Good”, “Great” and “You are on the right track”. This is the kind of classroom English that I constantly use in this kind of class. This type of classroom English is introduced to the learners on the very first day of class written with a Japanese translation of the phrases.

To summarize, the purpose of the class is to have the learners develop their own situation model of the graded reading texts presented to them in spoken form. The reading to write tasks are scaffolded in such a way that allows the learners through their various role to accomplish this task. A lot of is going in this class and further research is necessary to find out what words the learners notice on their own, what decoding problems they have, what type of connections do the learners have if any to the texts they are reading. This paper was a summary of how to use reading circles as a way to develop learners' situation model.

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