Thinking in Japanese: An Effective Way to Facilitate Self-Expression in English

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Introduction

In this study, I look at how a Japanese teacher can effectively use reading materials to develop students' English proficiency level through several instructional approaches. At the same time, this study seeks to clarify how student's L1 (Japanese), can work effectively to develop students' academic reading competence in L2 (English). It also includes a suggestion of how much L1 should be used in class to support L2 learning.

For this study, I chose freshman students in an English reading course at a two-year college. I taught three different groups of students. Various approaches and materials were used for each course (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2). From the type of texts I chose, I expected my students to achieve certain goals. Mostly, I wanted them not to be content to be merely receptive readers, but to become active readers who were stimulated by what they read and could express their point of view about it. Some approaches and materials (see Appendix 1) failed to gain the students' interest. Whereas, some (see Appendix 2) enabled students to do additional self-study.

Most freshman students at this school are likely to be at the high-beginner or low-intermediate English proficiency level. Some are at a low-beginner level and a few are at an advanced level. At this level, the use of L1 could perform an important role in learners'

competence in the acquisition process of L2. My research on the effectiveness of L1 is based on Krashen's Input Hypothesis[i] and Affective Filter Hypothesis. My assumption is that effective L1 instruction would give the learners of L2 at the high beginner level more comprehensible input and would work effectively to lower their affective filter. In other words, it is not as effective to attain L2 competence for the learners at this level by putting them in an English-only speaking environment. Rather it is more effective to put them in a circumstance where they could have L1 instruction (Japanese) as much as they need. It should be emphasized that learners' proficiency level was high beginner (maybe including up to the low intermediate level). At this level, if learners are to effectively comprehend English (L2), they should be provided a certain amount of support in Japanese (L1) rather than to immerse them completely into a L2 environment.

Some Points of Rationale

From the findings of Ikeno (1998) about language transfer of L1 to L2, depending on the proficiency level in L2, the subjects (Japanese students) showed a difference in the amount of information that they could transfer from L1 to L2. This occurred even though it had been seen that the subjects had almost the same proficiency level in their L1. Ikeno assumes that the learner in the lower proficiency level (L2) might concentrate on low level linguistic processing, such as processing the meaning of each word. This might prevent high level processing, such as the ability of one to think in L2 referring to the knowledge from L1. Therefore, for the learner at the low proficiency level, it would be necessary to get as much substitute information from the L1 as they did not under-

stand in their L2.

Like most Japanese college students, the students at Sophia Junior College seem to have better reading competence compared to oral performance in L2. Also, some students experience unnecessary psychological pressure in classes where they find it difficult to express themselves fully with their own ideas in L2. As they are afraid of failing to find the correct form of speech or of just making mistakes in front of their peers, they may keep silent or at least may not show an active attitude for participating in class discussions. In fact, it seems difficult for them to communicate with each other about complicated matters with their limited vocabulary and their low proficiency level in L2. Therefore, if the teacher allows students to use their L1, they could communicate their ideas freely with their peers and they may even ask the teacher more questions.

It seems more effective for the learners of L2 to comprehend the reading content before starting class, if they could get background information about it in detail in L1. As a matter of fact, students need to know not only the definition of new words but also, beyond that, its historical background or meaning. Such is the case for many words and phrases related to international politics, economics, environmental issues, and other technological matters. Understanding these matters requires the reader to perform a more complicated task. Therefore, it would be better to do such tasks in the students' own language as much as possible. For example, after reading an article about a nuclear accident in Japanese (L1), students might read almost the same news in English (L2) and understand it better because of the prior information. Maybe they could learn new vocabulary through this parallel reading. Or from the instructor's side, they can help students learn in L2 by giving them

additional explanations in L1 about the issues.

Use of L1 would help students clarify how they are synthesizing their opinions about issues. That is, if students can express their points clearly in their L1, they also could get to the point of what they should say in their L2. Students should avoid word-for-word translation (literal translation) of both languages. To prevent this tendency in students, teachers need to encourage them to learn skills of making assumptions and interpreting the material they are reading. In order to challenge students, teachers can plan journal writing assignments for students in Japanese that later have to be written in English.

Theoretical Background: Krashen's Hypothesis

Based on his L2 acquisition theory, Comprehensible Input, instruction in L1 may be effective in improving the acquisition process in L2. Krashen is an advocate of bilingual education and he stated that:

> "Bilingual programs can teach English effectively if two conditions are met: a source of comprehensible input in English and solid first language subject matter teaching, the latter providing extralinguistic information that will help make English more comprehensible …. The main point behind such a strategy is that the time spent studying the subject matter in the first language will result in more comprehension and learning, and thus more rapid and efficient acquisition of the second language" (Krashen, 1989: 83).

Also, Krashen was explaining how the first language can help the learners :

> "Research of Cummins shows that older students who arrive with quality education in their first language often outperform students brought up in the United States. These immigrant students have well-developed cognitive academic language proficiency, as well as specific subject matter knowledge, assets that make classroom English more comprehensible. Many limited English proficient children, arriving in the United States with little or inadequate academic training, do not have this advantage. Special programs that provide CALP[iii] in the first language are especially important for these children" (Krashen, 1989:82).

He emphasized the importance of CALP and knowledge that the learners would be able to gain through a good education in the first language, that is, "knowledge of the world and specific subject matter knowledge. CALP and knowledge, gained through the first language make English (L2) input more comprehensible; and sometimes make it much more comprehensible." (Krashen, 1989: 72).

Study of Transfer of Reading Skills from Spanish to English
In the same way, some researchers of the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs in the United States are conducting empirical research with elementary school children en-

rolled in bilingual education programs in the U.S.

> "About <u>Processes and Meta-Processes in Comprehension Instruction</u>; "The case study of Jimenez and his colleagues, an excellent Spanish-English bilingual reader, shows the use of similar strategies for identifying words and comprehending text in both languages, and the frequent use of information from the other language. For example, they suggest that successful bilingual readers all used certain strategies for comprehending both Spanish and English texts: focusing on unknown words, using cognates as one source of knowledge, monitoring their comprehension, making inferences and actively using prior knowledge. Unsuccessful readers focused much less on comprehension as their goal for reading." (August, Carlo & Colderon, 2000).

Examples of Practicing Adult Literacy Education

Some programs seek to improve literacy skills of learners' L1 which result in improving the literacy skills in their L2. Rivera (1999) refers to some important research in this area:

> "Evidence from research conducted with adults in the United States in recent years and data derived from programs serving adult English language and literacy learners indicate the positive role that literacy in the native language plays in the acquisition of oral English and the development of English literacy.

Research shows that reading in the native language aids the acquisition of and reading ability in a second language. A study conducted with adult learners from diverse language backgrounds such as Spanish, Cambodian and Korean suggests that these learners may benefit from their native language literacy skills because there is a transfer in basic reading skills from the first to the second language irrespective of the scripts involved."(Rivera, 1999).

The research indicates that learners who have advanced skills for reading in L1 would also use the same strategy in L2 to decode the meaning of the objects. She also adds some examples of program models of Adult Literacy Education, (1) such as bilingual type, in which " literacy in the native language and ESL are taught alongside usually by a bilingual teacher." (2) In another case, "Adult education programs that do not offer native language instruction but that aim to teach English language and literacy may use learners' native languages as instructional support in a variety of ways." And then later, she adds, "Or others use L1 at beginning ESL levels to help students with basic vocabulary, concept knowledge development, and semantic and syntactic understanding." (Rivera, 1999).

Some Approaches to the Reading Course for College Students
<u>Approach A</u>

Course objectives were mainly for the students to read short stories, to think about them, and to express their ideas in English (L2). The teacher explained to the students in L1 the background, plot and structure of the story, and cues for understanding the

characteristics of a short story. These explanations help the students to understand the short story better. As the text was prepared for intermediate level readers, the content and writing style, including vocabulary, were adopted to include simple expressions. As follow-up work, there were questions about content at the end of each reading. There were also questions, vocabulary quizzes, cloze questions, and open-ended questions asking for their thoughts and their feelings. Open-ended questions were a rather difficult task to complete for the students because most of the stories written in the 18th or 19th Century were difficult for young readers to relate to.

Some students felt frustrated because they could not understand the story fully due to lack of vocabulary and background information. Some lower level students in class could not keep up with the reading pace of in class. As for the writing tasks, the relatively advanced students expressed their point of view of the story in L2, whereas, some low-level students could write only a few sentences.

Approach B

I decided to choose a current subject for the next approach. The textbook I used contained interesting controversial issues in it and its topics were contemporary. It also provided readers an opportunity to think about each subject from different points of views. It seemed eventually to work effectively to draw unique opinions from each student. After reading each thematic passage, some questions were presented as discussion material. The teacher recommended the students do pair-talk or group discussion in L1. The students were free to exchange their own opinions with their peers. However, some were reluctant to do so. Each group presented their

comments in L1 in front of their peers, but in a casual manner. The teacher wrote down their opinions on the blackboard in L2, organizing and synthesizing the opinions into a diagram.

At the final review of each chapter, the students were assigned to write in L2 their overview of the issue. As additional work, they were also assigned to read several articles in newspapers or magazines about topics that they were interested in and to complete a writing journal once every two weeks; making a summary of the article and the writing their opinion. Moreover, a research paper was due as the final project; they chose their topics from interesting issues, started researching articles along their theme, reading and synthesizing them into the opinion on a final report at last. The students were required to turn in writing portfolios, containing all the works they had completed during the course.

Many students evaluated this course as useful for improving their reading skills and were interested because of the research work. But still some of them were critical of the class discussions because they always followed the same style. In addition, clearer instruction and support are needed to better complete the research project. Also, too much time was spent to find out the proper subject for the final paper. Finally, there was not sufficient time to give students enough feedback for revising their final work.

Approach C

The purpose of this course was to help L1 readers use strategies and read L2 more effectively. In order to promote students' activity in class, group work and group presentations were coordinated. Through the presentations, students were introduced to each chapter's content in L1. Main characteristics of each strategy were

pointed out. Most groups prepared a transparency sheet of OHP to make their thoughts visual and understandable for the audience. Students needed more reading opportunities beyond the reading text. Therefore, they were assigned a writing journal, in which they had to read twelve interesting articles and to write their opinions about them. This work had to be done in L1 first and then gradually shifted to L2. But very few students could intentionally practice this shift. Those students seemed to have a strong motivation to improve their skills in L2 or to be in a more advanced stage than other students.

Reconsidering course design, teachers have to prepare many ways to change the routine, otherwise content might get boring. Through this course, instruction did not go further than reading texts and giving explanations about each strategy.

Conclusion

From the overview of these approaches at reading courses, it is felt that giving L2 learners supplemental instruction in their L1 would be effective to reduce their tension or fear caused by a lack of self-confidence. In other words, Krashen (1988) states that lowering the affective filter of learners gives them more power of expression. As for the standard level of these college students, learners at the first stage seem to need more instruction in L1 compared to other more advanced students.

Teachers should provide an environment in which learners will be able to listen to native speakers and to talk to them as much as possible. Teachers should pay more attention to their students' initial needs and help them in Japanese. However, eventually teachers need to encourage their students to move to a higher develop-

mental stage and to use English more and more.

Appendix 1

<u>Approach A</u>

Text: American Adapted Short Stories

Purpose:

① Enjoying reading stories that are easy to understand.

② Introducing students to some basic reading strategies like skim-ming or scanning.

③ To assess students' comprehension, not only using Y/N ques-tions, but also open-ended questions. I had them give their own opinions in English about what they read.

④ For critical reading, analyzing the story by considering:

- Authors' background history

- Typical characteristics of author's techniques

- Explanation of technical terms of short story writing: (characters, setting, plot, climax, ending, etc.)

⑤ Instruction in Japanese

- To get the whole picture, give some interpretation about the stories

- To get the main idea, explain the story cue.

- Cultural background on each story

⑥ Watching the movie, "Twelve Angry Men," related to the story (to know the jury system in the U.S.). The film had closed caption on the screen that helped students find out the jury's psychologi-cal change that affected the decision for the sentence of the defendant.

Teacher's Reflections:

① Not an easy text for students (despite the text's level which was low-intermediate.) Possible reasons why they might lose their interest in this material are:

- Stories are not timely and story settings are not familiar to them. It might be difficult for them culturally to understand the situation.

- Students tried to read each story without a dictionary. But it was not an easy task for them to understand the whole picture until the instructor gave them some cues. Some were misreading the story line that might happen due to a lack of vocabulary and syntactic knowledge.

② Some wanted to confirm the content word for word (literal translation) instead of making a summary of the story. They felt insecure if they couldn't clarify the meaning of whole sentences.

In order to empower students with new vocabulary, I gave them a quiz at the beginning of each class, using another vocabulary exercise sheet. It might be too time consuming for students to study and memorize the vocabulary, in addition to reading the text.

Appendix 2

Approach B

Text: Both Sides Now / for the debate on the controversial issues

Purpose:

① Enjoy reading (interesting articles on current issues)

② Vocabulary learning by listening to the tape and reading the text out loud. (Both at class and at home).

③ Get in touch with various opinions about controversial issues (Pro/ Con) to open your eyes to the world.

④ Thinking about issues in L1 might help students have their own opinions.

⑤ Choose the subject of your research and make research to write the final report about the subject.

- By using resources (L1 & L2) of Internet/ newspapers/ magazines

⑥ Writing Journal once every two weeks about whatever they are interested in. (Making a summary of the article then writing their opinion in English)

⑦ Finally make up a writing portfolio as a final synthesis of all work:

⑧ Self-evaluation of students:

- progress in their English skills

- degree of satisfaction with the accomplishment of the term work.

- Attitude about the course

- Materials

Teacher's Reflections:

① Each topic in the text was interesting and provocative to enable students to start thinking seriously about issues. Let students take part to choose the topics out of lists that would be dealt in class.

② Duplicating recording tape to only those who wanted and submitted empty tape to the teacher.

③ Mainly, as a preparation before class, recommend that they look at the text and practice reading it out loud at home. Some took advantage of listening to the tape and memorizing new vocabulary while listening to the pronunciation. Some did not use tapes very much.

④ Let them think about the issues individually, in a pair, and in a

group. They talked about it in their native language (Japanese). For some students, it is good to know peers' opinions through such an interactive communication.

⑤ Deciding the subject of research was the most time-consuming task for them. In addition, looking for the appropriate article for their subject was a very difficult task. I should have made a specific list of topics that was narrowed down from the vast choice at the beginning so that they could find their topics from it. It might be an easier task for them to choose their subject rather than to look for it.

⑥ Make a deal about due date of assignment with students. It is important to make it clear for learners if they submitted their assignment occasionally past the due date, their work might be graded lower than if they submitted it on time.

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i Krashen has hypothesized (1982) that humans acquire language in only one way -- by understanding messages or by receiving *Comprehensible Input*. We are aided in comprehension by context: our knowledge of the world, extralinguistic information, and previously acquired language. We do not acquire language by producing it or learning about it. An additional requirement for successful acquisition is that the acquirer be "open" to the input (Krashen, 1989:50).

The Input Hypothesis:

1. We acquire by understanding input language that contains structure a bit beyond our current level of competence.

2. Speech is a result, not a cause, of acquisition.

3. If input is understood, and if there is enough of it, grammatical structures the acquirer is ready to acquire are automati-

cally provided.

[ii] The *Affective Filter*, a mental block that prevents acquirers from fully utilizing the comprehensible input they receive for language acquisition, needs to be "down". The Filter is "up" when the acquirers unmotivated, lacking in self-confidence, or anxious. It is down when the acquirer is not concerned with the possibility of failure in language acquisition and when he or she considers himself or herself to be a potential member of the group that speaks the second language (Krashen,1989:10).

[iii] Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) is a term coined by Professor James Cummins (1980, 1981). CALP refers to the ability to use language in "context-reduced" situations, the ability to use language to learn and discuss abstractions. CALP is, in other words, closely related to literacy -- the ability to use language as an intellectual tool, to read for meaning and for pleasure, and to write, both to communicate with others and, perhaps more important, to clarify our thoughts and come up with new thoughts. (Krashen, 1989:72)

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