

## Exploration of Communication-Oriented English Reading Class at the University Level

MURAHATA, Yoshiko

### 1. Introduction

This paper presents an attempt to organize a communication-oriented reading comprehension class at the university level in Japan where only the target language, English, is used. It deals with how we can activate communicative interaction between the writer and the reader, and also among the readers through reading. First we discuss what reading should be like in English classes at the university level in Japan from perspectives of communication and foreign language learning. Then some types of reading practice are presented.

### 2. What Reading English should Be Like at the University Level

#### 2.1 Reading in English Reading Classes

English 'reading comprehension' classes are most commonly offered in English courses in many universities in Hokkaido (Nishihori et al., 1994). This prevalence of reading classes is quite reasonable and acceptable because reading is the most frequent activity in academic context of the four language skills; reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Carroll, 1980). We certainly get a good deal of academic information through reading books and papers at the university.

Reading is also an important activity in learning a foreign language as "a means of consolidating and extending our knowledge of the language" (Rivers, 1981: 259). It furthermore supplies abundant information about the target language in socio-cultural views. Its easy availability is valuable especially in a country like Japan where learners are usually isolated from native speakers (Wallace, 1992). It can take place wherever a reader and some proper reading material are, because it doesn't need another person involved or any audio-visual equipment (Kakita and Matsumura, 1984).

English reading classes at the universities in the present situation, however, do not seem to be highly evaluated as a successful way of learning English by university students (Nishihori et al., 1994). There seems to be several reasons for this. First, reading depends too much on translation work and explanation of grammatical structures in the classroom, so that quite often students *feel they are reading* as they are translating. This kind of reading doesn't prove to be useful to learn English. After reading a good deal of materials in English, students find themselves still incompetent to use it in actual situations. Second, reading is considered to be a *receptive* activity and in most reading classes *productive* activities are not expected on the readers' side. In these classes, students are supposed to translate and listen to the explanation and are not encouraged to use the target language as a way to communicate with others. Third, they concentrate on reading *sentence by sentence*,

or clause by clause, so that students cannot take a whole view of the text when they are asked to *summarize* it or to *get the gist* (Tajika, 1995). This may leave them with a feeling of discontent.

It may be true that students understand each sentence in the material at literal level in these reading classes. But it is doubtful whether they are really learning to read in the target language and actually reading through translation and grammar explanation. It is also doubtful whether this reading can be a practical way to learn a foreign language. That Japanese learners of English are good at reading though they are very poor at speaking is now only a fading myth (Kakita and Matsumura, 1984: 22-25).

To get out of the present receptive and explanatory reading style, which holds a micro-point of view and requires much translation, the present paper first discusses some basic aspects of reading and tries to understand what reading should be like in reading classes at the university level. The present writer hopes that the discussion would be a plausible starting point to change grammar-oriented reading into a more communicative-oriented reading.

## 2.2 Reading as Communication

Two characteristics of reading should be stressed here, which are relevant to the present attempt of teaching reading classes. One is that reading should not be regarded as a passive or receptive activity, but as an interactive communicative activity between the writer, the sender of the text, and the reader, the receiver of the text. The lack of observable interactions between the writer and the reader in reading makes it look like a passive activity, but it requires the reader to decode the text in an active way. For reading to be successful, we should keep in mind that the writer expects the reader to share certain amount of common knowledge and to follow the written ideas along the same path with the writer. Authentic reading takes place where there is "some communicative intent on the writer's part", which the reader is to attempt to interpret (Wallace, 1992).

The other characteristic of reading is its solely linguistic-dependent nature (Davies and Widdowson, 1974), which makes it one of the most difficult cognitive activities. While oral communication can depend on paralinguistic elements such as gesture, facial expression, intonation, and some other cues from the context of situation, written communication depends solely on decoding written texts. Oral communication usually takes place as a direct interaction between two people involved, so that negotiations of meaning between the two, asking questions from the text-receiver side, or paraphrasing on the text-sender part could be possible (Bygate, 1987). But this is not the case with reading comprehension. Written texts, because of these features, usually hold longer clauses or sentences with more complex sentence structures and lack redundancy. Thus it needs more accurate syntactic knowledge and wider vocabulary of the language to correctly understand what is written.

Reading also requires the ability to infer the intention of the writer from literal meanings. At this implicational level of reading, readers are required to have general knowledge of the world or even specific background knowledge of some particular topics

which they share with the writer. Based on all kinds of knowledge stored, readers can make full use of their intellectual capacities to infer what is implied by literal expression. All these cognitive activities of decoding a text and inferring the writer's intention should be processed in readers' mind: that is, readers should actively participate in reading.

Reading in a foreign language at the university level, or even from the very beginning of learning, should keep the interactive characteristic of reading and expect readers' active participation. It should not be mere substitution of words from the target language to the native language and vice versa.

### 2.3 Reading as a Skill-Using Activity

To regard reading as a communicative activity is extremely important when we think of the ultimate goal of language learning, which is often described as "to be able to communicate with others freely in the target language" (Rivers and Temperley 1978: 3). "To communicate with others" is possible in reading class as an interaction between the writer and the reader. Now let us see reading in a general framework of the process of foreign language learning.

Processes involved in language learning to communicate can be divided into two parallel phases according to Rivers and Temperley's learning schema; "skill-getting" and "skill-using" (1978: 4). In this schema learning about the language units, categories, functions, and their rules, and pseudo-communication such as conversation format practice fall into the "skill-getting" phase. Only real communication or interaction is included in the "skill-using" phase. Though these two phases are expected to proceed parallel with each other from the beginning, skill-getting activities tend to be considered important and to be highly evaluated in a school context with external rewards, such as grades, certificates, and diplomas. It is clear that this is not what foreign language learning aims at.

From the viewpoint of language learners' fulfillment, 'to use' the words or linguistic forms they have learned should be actualized in the class. Skill-using activities or real interactions are what learners expect most in language learning classes. They do not feel satisfied and do not estimate English classes as valuable, interesting or stimulating unless they actually take opportunities to *use* linguistic items they have learned (Nishihori, 1995). This is quite compatible with the statements from theories on cognitive psychology applied to foreign language learning. It is said that as students become engaged with each other in communication and freed from linguistic forms and rules they would satisfy their fundamental internal motivation of exploration, stimulation, manipulation and so on (Brown 1994: 33-48). Our interaction is best accomplished when learners attend to meanings and messages and not to grammar and other linguistic forms. This is when students feel most rewarded and their innate drives will be most satisfied.

The teachers' task in a foreign language classroom is, therefore, to have the students put aside the linguistic forms of the target language and try to focus their attention on meanings. They can do this by carefully directing their attention to the content of a written text by instructions and questions. Who? What? When?... and Yes-no questions about the

content and true-false questions are most frequently given to check their understanding both at linguistic and content levels. The point is how teachers provide the students with organized activities which would guide them to understand the content by using the target language as a means of communication.

Reading is now regarded as interaction between the writer and the reader. Furthermore, reading activities in foreign language classroom should be directed toward normal uses of language as a skill-using activity (Rivers and Temperley, 1978). Now one more aspect of reading should be considered. Interaction means sharing but it also means receiving and sending messages, where some flows of thoughts would go back and forth between the persons participated in the interaction. When readers receive some messages from the writer, where should the messages from the readers go? There needs to be some place for readers to express themselves to satisfy their inner drives.

#### 2.4 Reading toward Self-Expression

If reading is such an interactive communication, some kind of reaction from the readers' side or some change in the readers' thoughts would be naturally expected. After 'reading' something, readers' thoughts, ideas and feelings may not be the same as before: they have acquired new ideas, therefore have made some judgments on what they read based on their former experiences and knowledge, and they may hold some opinions or questions (Yoshioka, 1982). Interaction is basically a collaborative work and results in "reciprocal effect on each other," which means "sending and receiving messages." (Brown, 1994). Expressing what has been thought and what is thought after reading by writing or by speaking, therefore, could be practically considered to be a part of reading activity (Monbusho, 1989).

We use language not only to receive and comprehend messages but also to express and convey our own personal meanings. In case of foreign language learning as well as in native language use, being able to speak the target language without being able to understand what is said by native speakers, or being able to write in the target language without being able to understand what is written in the language are of limited use and seem quite unrealistic (Rivers and Temperley, 1978: 3). "Production and reception are quite simply two sides of the same coin" (Brown 1994: 219).

This reciprocal interaction of reading has been suggested in many books and papers. Rivers states that learners "must be continually provided with opportunities to use material they have read in the book in an active interchange of communication" and reading can be "the base for oral reports... or full class discussion (1981: 265-285)." Brown indicates a recent trend toward integrated lessons of four skills and gives an example of a reading-class which has a pre-reading *discussion*, *listening* to statements about the topic to be read, *reading* a passage, and *writing* a paraphrase of the passage (1994: 218). Brown also claims that four skills can reinforce each other. Thus language teachers can plan a flexible class of different activities for learners to use the target language to express themselves and satisfy their intellectual exploration.

As consolidation of what learners have read, writing what they think about it or how they feel after they read could be included in a reading lesson. In order to do so, the students must primarily attend to the meanings, only secondarily to the forms of language, and seek the whole passage for the important points from a macro-point of view. Self-expression activities surely give learners fulfillment of learning a foreign language by actual use of it, which would not be found through grammar-translation activities depending on the native language.

### 3. Exploration of Communication-Oriented Reading Class

In this section the present writer will present some types of communication activities introduced in reading-classes at Otaru University of Commerce from April to December, 1995. Each class has from forty to forty-five students of non-English majors. One lesson lasts ninety minutes and is given once a week as common among universities in Japan.

The instructor, the present writer, spoke mostly English, except for quite complicated occasions, in giving instructions and talking to the students. No translation work was given at all. This is to avoid the use of Japanese and encourage the students to use English for real communication in class. Once students start to use Japanese, there could be a fatal incline to become dependent on the native language. That would discourage the students from understanding directly from the written text without any intervention of the native language. Only when they cannot express themselves after several trials, or when they do not understand the instructor's English, Japanese is allowed not to block out the on-going communication to such a degree that an English speaking atmosphere would be maintained.

Students are required to read about 300-350 words of written texts before they attend class. A reading lesson usually starts by listening to the tape or the instructor's oral reading of the text for the lesson to make it sure which part will be today's lesson. After that two or three types of activities will usually follow during a lesson. Examples are the following.

(1) Questions by the students and answers by the instructor (oral work): It is useful to have the students get accustomed to the following question forms and ask the instructor about the linguistic forms or pronunciation of words in the text which they are not sure. Then they do not have to depend on Japanese to understand the content of the text. This in itself can be an authentic communication between the instructor and the students in classroom. All they have to do is to change the underlined parts. However, it is surprising how difficult it is for the students to use even such simple questions in 1 and 2 to mean them as real communication.

1. What does 'come into play' mean?
2. How do you pronounce 'r-e-c-i-p-r-o-c-a-l'?
3. I don't understand the second sentence in the first paragraph. Will you explain it?

These questions can also be used to ask about the content of the text.

(2) Content questions to check the understanding of what is written (oral work): Simple Who? What? When? Where? How (manner)? and Yes-no questions are appropriate to do this. It is desirable to start asking questions which can be answered by copying exactly the same words or phrases in the passage with a minimum change of sentence structure. This can be a form of oral reading practice which, above of all, encourages the students to speak out in English without hesitation in the first place. The next step is to have questions and answers with words and expressions which are familiar with the students but are not used in the text. This requires them to recall those words and expressions they have come across before and to learn how to paraphrase.

It should be reminded that some types of questions can be sometimes answered without understanding meanings. For example, the following questions and answers in 4 do not prove understanding of the text sentence (Takanashi and Takahashi: 1987). In this case, questions like 5a and 5b would help check understanding.

4. [text] He got a shot to go to Africa.

Question: What did he get to go to Africa?

Answer: A shot.

Question: What did he do to go to Africa.

Answer: He got a shot.

5. a Where do you think he got a shot?

b Where did he get a shot, at a hospital or in a yard?

(3) Implication questions (oral or written work): After literal level of understanding, the next step of reading is to try to grasp what is implied by what is written. Asked questions like “why... happened?” “if... then what would happen?” or “What does the writer mean by saying this?”, students will try to answer based on their knowledge about the world. This is when they actually start their autonomous reading by attending to meanings as described in 2.3. At a later stage of this type of questions, the students may be ready to answer the questions like “Do you agree with the writer?” or “Would you do the same thing if... ?” with a wider view on the whole passage.

As these questions usually require longer answers which students are supposed to think up and naturally they need time to construct sentences, it may be done as written work at a beginning stage of a course. One useful instruction here is to tell the students to make their English sentences short and clear so that others can understand the sentences well when they read them out. They tend to write quite long sentences just by translating their ideas in Japanese into English.

After writing, they make a pair and read their writings out for each other and then,

if possible, for the class. Another useful instruction here is to show them how to react to their partners by saying, “I see,” “I think so, too,” “Really?” and so on. This is meant to be a step to interact each other by telling and by reacting.

(4) Pseudo-conversation practice (oral): Reading provides a good amount of materials for classroom discussion. However, it is never easy for students to take turns to continue to talk with somebody about what they have read in English. Thus at the beginning stage of the course, they need to learn how to negotiate meanings with the partners and how to use conversation fillers to develop conversation. One way of doing this is to have them add reactions and fillers to a dialogue format in the textbook. The following example shows how to do this pseudo-conversation practice. After students read an article about special consideration for older people, they were instructed to add conversation fillers and reactions to the original dialogue in 6 given in the textbook (Johnson, 1995). Then they practiced the dialogue in pair as if they were actually talking. The underlined parts in 7 were the fillers and reactions added by the students during the class.

6. A: An old man cut into line in front of me this morning. I told him to go to the back of the line.  
B: Was that the best way to treat him? Many old people are not physically able to stand a long time.  
A: He looked perfectly healthy and able to stand to me. Rules are for everybody and all people should respect them.
7. A: Guess what happened this morning?  
B: What?  
A: An old man cut into line in front of me.  
B: Oh! What did you do then?  
A: I told him to go to the back of the line.  
B: Did you? Was that the best way to treat him?  
A: What do you mean?  
B: You know, many old people are not physically able to stand a long time.  
A: Well, he looked perfectly healthy and able to stand to me.  
B: Really?  
A: Yes! Rules are for everybody and all people should respect them.  
B: I don't think so.

This practice also gives the students a good opportunity to attend to meanings because they need to understand what the partner says in order to give appropriate reactions and fillers.

(5) Sentence completion to express individual ideas and opinions (writing and oral work): As

consolidation of what they have read, students should be encouraged to express their own ideas and opinions. When they are asked, however, such a question like “What do you think about this?” they are often at a loss where to start. To reduce their burden, it is helpful to change this question into sentence completion work with alternatives. Examples 7 and 8 are taken from Johnson (1995) and changed partly by the writer.

8. If someone cuts in front of me in line I (wouldn't say anything/would tell him to go back to the back of the line) because ...
  
9. I think smoking (should/doesn't have to) be banned entirely in public because...

The same kind of oral pair work described in (3) would be a good opportunity to exchange students' opinions after writing.

(6) Writing opinions by using several cue words from the text: This is another way to express individual ideas and opinions. First the instructor selects about ten words and phrases from the written text which they have read during the class. Then the students choose a certain number of words or phrases from the choices and make more than three sentences to express their own opinions. This activity can be a chance for the students to confirm correct spelling of certain words. 9 and 10 are actual examples of students' writing after they read an article about matchmaking service. Underlined parts are the words they have chosen.

10. I think both arranged marriage and love marriage is good. It is important to find true love after marriage. So, there is no desirable form of marriage.
  
11. I think arranged marriage is feudalistic. I don't want to get married through arranged marriage. But if I don't find marriage partner until 26 years old, I may get married through arranged marriage.

(7) Consolidation and making comments: For students to get freed from minute linguistic parts, they should be given a chance to take a whole view of what they have read. It may be easier to have them start to complete sentences which begin with, “In this chapter I have learned ...” or “After I read this chapter I thought...” than to give an instruction to make a summary or to write the gist. Students wrote the following after they read Chapter IV of Tanaka and Wardhaugh (1994). They were required to write after the underlined parts.

12. In Chapter 4, I have learned the relation between speaker's language and his social class. The UK and the United States has clear social classes and we can distinguish upper class people from lower class people because of their speaking language. I think this is interesting. As reading this chapter, I remembered a movie “My Fair Lady.” In Japan, we don't care how to speak very much. Because we think



“Everybody belongs to the middle class.”

13. In Chapter 4, I have learned a wide range of different uses of language, and there is relationship between social class and specific language uses... I found that r-pronunciation is prestigious in New York City, but in the south of England r-dropping has prestige... I think the topic of r-pronunciation is similar to the problem of “ranuki” in Japan.

#### 4. Discussion

Reading requires readers to attend to meanings, not only to linguistic forms, and to infer what the writer intends to convey. As we discussed in section 2, English reading classes can provide good opportunities to use English as communication between readers and the writer when those students actively participate in reading. Reading English as a means to learn a foreign language, therefore, should never be just translation and grammar explanation as often done in the English reading classroom. Those kind of tasks become only ends themselves and not paths toward actual use of the target language. They should never be learning. Language learners do not feel satisfied with their learning until they actually become able to use the target language for real communication.

The importance of this kind of reading should be repeated here. Rivers stresses that language learners should become able to read “the target language fluently, without deciphering it laboriously word by word,” and able to “approach a book or magazine article independently with confidence” (1981: 260). She also mentions this kind of reading ability can be maintained most easily if it is once developed. This means that students can continue to read to learn a foreign language during later individual study if they finish school with proper reading ability and attitude. Then they will be led to use English for some specific purpose when needed in the future.

As we saw some practical activities in section 3, English reading can also provide good opportunities for class to do various activities. The reading class in learning a foreign language course is not a place where only reading skill is to be improved. Other skills of listening, speaking, and writing should be crucially incorporated in various activities such as questions and answers, sentence completion tasks, exchanging opinions in pair work, and possibly full class discussion. Thus reading can be a base for overall foreign language learning.

As for students in the classroom, they are not used to use English as a means of communication with the instructor and their classmates. It naturally takes a lot of time for them to get used to it. Giving all the activities described above, the present writer had the impression that students have been accustomed to English only as letters and not as sounds. How difficult it is for some students to understand the instructor’s spoken English even if it is simple and easy! However, they would understand it without problem if it was written. Gradual development is expected only by successive encouragement and various kinds of

activities to attract and stimulate students.

It should be mentioned furthermore that universities will begin accepting new freshmen in 1997 who will have taken "Oral Communication" classes at senior high school after the new "Course of Study" was introduced in 1994. English education at high school level has been changing toward 'English for communication' during the past few years. Universities as well are naturally expected to take steps forward to achieve the ultimate goal of language learning, that is, to be able to communicate freely in the target language.

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