Effects of Prereading Activities: A Way to Change Student Reading Style

Kazufumi Endo
Teachers College of Columbia University

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Although a lot of research on reading mechanisms has been conducted since the 1970's, the dominant reading style in English reading class is *yakudoku* in Japan. The majority of the observed students were found to resort to bottom-up reading strategies and the priority of the class was to translate each sentence. In this project *prereading activities* were presented for five months in a Japanese local high school and the effects of the activities were found in student responses, interaction seemed to be born between students and texts.

70年代後半より、リーディングに関する多くのリサーチがされてきているが、依然として、訳読方式が支配している。この場合学習者が頼る手段は、辞書に依存する逐語的読解である。本プロジェクトにおいては、プリリーディング・アクティビティーを与えることで、学習者のリーディング・スタイルがトップ・ダウン的な方法を取り入れ、どのようにテキストとのインターアクションが生まれるかを考察した。

Despite a growing number of recent reading research studies, the history of research on reading mechanism is quite short. Indeed it is unknown exactly what is happening in readers' brain while they are reading, and various reading styles have been introduced one after another, such as bottom-up, top-down, and interactive. In spite of the vast amount of reading research, it is totally undeniable that here in Japan bottom-up reading style still dominates. Above all "yakudoku" (Gorsuch, 1998) is still prevalent in English reading class. It is quite often the case that the majority of class time is allocated to literal translation. Indeed in my class, too, it is a common scene that students have hardly finished reading the first whole sentence when they start to look up for a strange word in their dictionaries. A survey conducted in my reading class showed that more than four-fifths of the students regarded the Japanese translation of each English sentence as the main purpose of attendance in English class. It means the significance of the interaction between students and texts is belittled by the majority of the students. In this context students are found not to utilize their background knowledge even if they have a fair amount of information related to the texts. Apparently it is a waste of student resources. In this perspective, teachers are required to help students become more intrigued in the contents of the texts. For these reasons it is vital for teachers to present some activities to shift student decoding or bottom-up reading style to the more interactive and top-down way of reading.

Prereading Activities

As Aline (1992) indicates, it is out of date to ignore the usefulness of prereading activities in reading classes. In journals and books, a number of articles (Aebersold & Field, 1997; Barnett, 1989; Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992, Pate, 1995) have been written about activities and themes relevant to pre-reading. In addition, although some researchers (Frehan, 1999), do not use the word, "prereading," they acknowledge the importance of the activities in their work. Empirical studies (Akagawa, 1992; Amanuma, 1990; Andrade, 1997; Chen & Graves, 1995; Frehan, 1999; Hudson, 1982; Kueker, 1990) have demonstrated the effectiveness of prereading activities and tell us that these activities are often broadly utilized by students.

Although there are slight differences in definition about what prereading activities consist of, researchers (e.g., Aline, 1992; Andrade, 1997) usually point out that the activity is made up of preliminary questions, presentation of background knowledge, whose effects are described by Ushiro et al. (2004), and introduction of key or unknown vocabulary. Fukuo (1990) and Andrade (1997) claim that the following benefits derive from prereading activities: (1) To provide students with a particular purpose for reading; (2) To help them predict the content of the text; (3) To facilitate comprehension; (4) To motivate students to read.

Then in the reading context, if the activities cover three aspects: presentation of vocabulary, preliminary questions and information relevant to texts, how student reading strategy could be changed and rectified. In the next chapter methodology of this project will be described.

Methodology

Setting

Participants were 33 12th graders at a public co-educational high school in the eastern part of Shizuoka Prefecture and the duration of the treatment was from September in 2001 throughout January in 2002. The English level of the students, judging from the mean score on the high school entrance examination, is on par with other public high schools throughout the prefecture.

Class read stories from the textbook *New English Street Reading* (Hazumi et al., 2001). Each story is four or five pages long in addition to reading comprehension questions. The class usually spent six to eight 50-minute periods to finish reading one story. So the class usually read one page of the textbook per period.

Activities and Handouts

Three kinds of handouts were usually prepared for each class meeting. One type was prereading questions, focused on activating student background knowledge and encouraging student interest in the topics or stories they were to read. Another handout was designed to help students build vocabulary with a sheet of from five to ten sentences including important vocabulary. The sentences were usually not the same as those in the textbook, but were adopted and simplified from various dictionaries. The other type of handout included a sheet of background and pictorial information. Pictures and photos relevant to stories were often utilized to explain background information. After the class spent about ten to fifteen minutes on the activities per

period, the class looked at the textbook. The class was taught four periods per week. Up to ten handouts for each story were prepared.

Research Questions

The research questions were to assess how prereading activities could change student reading strategy and dependence on dictionaries and their *yakudoku* reading style and how student interaction to texts can be enhanced.

Criteria

Student Responses to Open-ended Questions

On the October, December and January tests feedback questions asking what students thought of the stories were included. The questions were open-ended and the students were allowed to write their opinions and impressions freely. Ada's (1988a, 1988b) creative reading methodology was used and student responses were identified showing which stage each response reached. Ada (1988a, 1988b) distinguishes two phases: descriptive and interpretative.

In the descriptive phase, students are required to learn what is written in the text. Proper questions may be "What happened? Where, when, and how did it happen? Who did it?" (Ada 1988a, p. 104) The answers to those descriptive questions can be found in the textbook.

In the personal interpretative phase, students relate the text to their own experiences. Reasonable questions include: "Do you know of (or have you ever seen/ felt/ experienced) something like this? Have you ever done (or felt/ thought/ wanted) something similar?" (Ada 1988a, p. 104). Ada (1988a) claims that the personal interpretative phase helps students realize that "true reading occurs only when the information received is analyzed in the light of their own experiences and emotions" (p. 104). Student responses were categorized either as the descriptive or personal interpretative on three tests and factors were investigated which may have contributed to help student ideas get to the personal interpretative phase.

Class Observation and Teaching Journals

A teaching journal and audiotaping were used to keep records of student response and reaction to my questions and interactions in class. Gorsuch's (1998) classification of classroom interaction was adopted into three foci: (1) Japanese Translation Focus Activities on the sentence, word or phrasal level (2) Content instruction including questions and answers about students' own opinions on topics as well as my instruction on contents and comments on the logic of the author (3) Explanations about syntax, morphology, structure of sentences on the story. In addition to observations about interaction type, I analyzed whether the questions I asked were display or inferential. Answers to display questions were explicitly mentioned in texts or dictionaries such as "Who was the first woman to reach the top of Mt. Everest?" and answers to inferential questions were not explicitly mentioned such as "What would you think if your tent was attacked by an avalanche?" So students have to use their own ideas and predictions. The number of each interaction and questions were counted.

Comparison of Student Reading Strategy

The students read a page individually in class and ticked

off which strategy they used. Yamato's (2001) and Block's (1986) way of classification of reading strategies: bottom-up, top-down and metacognitive strategies were adopted. After an explanation and demonstration, students designated which strategy/ies they used after they understood each sentence. The check sheet that students used was written in Japanese. Each time I counted the alphabetical letters that students wrote and sorted out the letters into the three types.

Table 1. Student reading strategies

Bottom up

A.	I translated.
B.	I read again and again.
C.	I replaced some words with a similar word.
D.	I thought about the meaning of vocabulary and phrases.
E.	I thought about the syntax of a sentence or used my grammatical knowledge.

Top-down

F.	I imagined the next sentence while reading the previous sentence.
G.	I used my own background information including information I got in class or experience.
H.	I agreed or disagreed with the content of the sentence.
I.	I thought about how related the sentence was with the previous sentence.
J.	The idea came to my mind that the contents of this sentence was very important
K.	While reading a sentence, I thought about the cause, effect, or results

Metacognitive

L.	As I understood a sentence, I felt satisfied to know my way of reading was correct.
M.	I corrected my previous understanding while reading.

Survey and Interviews

A questionnaire survey was conducted in September and January, asking students what they thought was important in reading successfully, how they read, and what strategies they used. Student responses in September and responses in January were compared. In addition, five students were interviewed in January as to whether students felt positive about prereading activities as an aid to understand texts, to build up vocabulary, or to develop a connection between their own lives and the content of stories.

Findings

Responses to Open-ended Questions

The activities seemed to activate student interaction with the text because about half of the answers were affected by the activities and which utilized questions, information given in class including my own various experiences.

In the following, some examples from each stage are presented. The following responses went beyond translation because their description or opinion mentioned not just facts on the text but also information through my intervention

or idea which came to them from preliminary questions. For instance in December, the scene I picked out for the test showed a situation where a Japanese girl was not being served in a grocery store. An example such as "She was ignored by other people." (T. K.) (The acronyms in this section refer to students used in this study.) was representative of the descriptive phase because T. K. just wrote what the text described. However some examples of the answers which got to the "personal interpretative phase" incorporated the questions in the prior activity. As an example M. K., a student wrote "She couldn't buy anything. But I am a determined person. So what kind of treatment I was given, I wouldn't mind." My talk about my own experience effected the following response, "She was not served in the shop. I remember I felt unwanted in a certain shop. Mr. Endo experienced a similar thing. He often ate lunch at the corner in a student cafeteria in Birmingham." (T. Y.)

Those who got to the personal interpretative phase used information or prereading activities such as "What would you do, if you were…?" I could find examples of personification of characters in texts. As an example of personification with a character, a student, K. I. wrote "If I were Junko Tabei, I couldn't climb Mt. Everest. I was impressed by her action of thinking of her family even in the snow." Table 2 shows the number of responses at each stage.

Indeed about forty percent of the student responses remained at descriptive stage and some students did not express their impression, and the percentage of personal interactive stage did not seem to elevate in accordance with their familiarity to the activities. However at least about one third to nearly fifty percent of the students seemed to utilize the activities in responding to the questions. As the table 3 shows, preliminary questions such as "If you were…, what would you do?" were likely to facilitate student interaction most among the three factors.

Table 2. Student responses on each monthly test

Test	October		December		January	
Story	Junko ...		Protein ...		Why I ...	
Descriptive response	12	36.3%	14	42.4%	12	36.3%
Personal response	14	42.4%	11	33.3%	14	42.4%
No answer	7	21.2%	8	24.2%	7	21.2%
Total responses	33	100%	33	100%	33	100%

Table 3. Students' personal interpretative responses

Month of test	October		December		January	
Prereading questions	9	56.3%	7	53.9%	8	50%
Background information	5	15.2%	4	30.8%	5	31.3%
Endo's Experience	2	13.3%	2	15.4%	3	18.8%
Total responses	16	100%	13	100%	16	100%

Interaction in Class

Prereading activities such as inferential questions allowed me to ask students content-based questions, their experience relative to a topic in class. Students had to guess, imagine, personalize and they were allowed to express their own opinion and I could improvise and develop interaction with students. Although the class had fewer translation activities, few students asked me for more translation in their feedback. In addition as summary of a text from students caught the main outline, non-translation activities like asking students inferential questions seemed to work in terms of helping students understand the contents. Besides it was likely that other activities such as content-based interaction helped students understand stories better, too.

In class, most activities included questions about student prediction or experiences, making activities and questions more content based and inferential. For instance when the class read *Protein East and West*, the class seemed to be helped to gain an overview of the story with questions such as "Do you think people in Europe and the United States feel more interested in *tofu* or bean curds, *shoyu*, soy sauce, *natto*, fermented soybeans?" (Type 2, content, inferential) My questions were asking whether nominated students had some knowledge on the topic. I asked other questions such as "How do you think your life would be different without soybeans?" (Type 2, content, inferential) These questions seemed to help the students to think about the difference in diet between the East and the West.

Table 4. Students' responses to activity type

Date	Nov. 13		Nov. 20	
Story	Still with Us		Protein East and West	
Activities				
Type 1. Translation	6	37%	9	34.6%
Type 2. Content	14	60%	13	50%
Type 3. Syntax and others	3	13%	4	15.4%
Total responses	23	100%	26	100%
Types of questions I asked students				
Inferential questions	13		12	
Displayed questions	15		14	
Purpose of questions				
To give background knowledge	5		4	
To ask students whether students have similar experience or hypothetical questions like "If you were..., what would you do...?"	6		6	
Endo's experience	2		2	

Reading Strategies

It could be argued that presentation of crucial vocabulary and information were found in general very useful to change student reading strategies, although there was individual differences. Students seemed to use preliminary questions and information in reading of a new text, which helped them

adopt a more top down reading strategies. About one-third of the strategies students ticked off were top-down ones like information presented in class. Among the five top-down strategies, information given as part of prereading activities came first. The numbers in table 5 are the total number of strategies students used each time in each class.

Table 5. Distribution of reading strategies

Story	Junko...		Protein...		Why I...	
Date	Nov. 8		Nov. 22		Jan. 16	
Bottom-up	324	67.9%	307	61.9%	313	65.6%
Top-down	132	27.7%	171	34.5%	142	29.8%
Meta-cognitive	21	4.4%	18	3.6%	22	4.6%
Total incidents of reading strategies	477	100%	496	100%	477	100%

Those who used more top-down strategy turned to information, pictures, photos, and prereading questions because they said they were relieved of the burden of consulting dictionaries. Students who resorted to metacognitive strategies were usually high scorers on tests.

Questionnaires and Interviews

In the September survey more than two thirds of the students put their first priority on translation. In the January survey while a limited number of students, the majority of whom were students who got low points on tests, still missed translation, others argued that they managed with decreased translation activities. In addition, while in September almost all of the students responded that they just used dictionaries in reading, in January more than two thirds of the students claimed that they used other aids like information related to the stories together with dictionaries. In proportion to better understanding or grasp of the outline, the importance of translation and vocabulary decreased. Furthermore some of the interviewed students argued that when they understood vocabulary and got the general outline of a text, they could confirm or rectify their understanding of the content. It meant that those students were likely to have started to adopt metacoginitive strategies.

The survey in September showed that the 80% of the students regarded making an appropriate translation as the most important factor in class and almost all the students consulted dictionaries whenever they didn't catch the meaning of sentences. However considerable changes were found in January when the five-month intervention was over in both aspects: twenty percent of the students expressed that the purpose of each English class was to get Japanese translation of each English sentence and only ten percent of the students responded that they quickly turned to just dictionaries when they came across difficult words in reading. The survey also showed that more than two-thirds of the students were not satisfied with just getting literal translation.

Discussion

Although I have described effects which were probably caused by my special intervention, there were still some students who stuck to *yakudoku* style reading. Even among high scorers there were such students who asked for Japanese translation of each English sentence though they started to utilize top-down strategies. However, I conducted activities and had interactions with students in which the students' own opinions on the contents of texts were expressed. It looked like students put themselves in characters' situations and guessed the development of a story.

For these reasons the most effective way of helping even lower score students change their reading strategy was likely to give information connected to stories, including pictures together with preview sheets of vocabulary because the interview showed that information related to a topic gave them the idea of genre and the outline of the text. When they got acquainted with a story or a character in the stories, not just high scorers but also low scorers were likely to go over word for word translation and tried to understand in more top-down styles. To conclude, the case where students got the most satisfaction from reading was usually the following one: students were given or got a general idea about a story and they did not have to be preoccupied with new vocabulary, and students had some connection to the story.

As Casanave (1988) asserts that exact monitoring of comprehension is difficult, I can not say what was taking place in the students' minds. However the questions I prepared seemed to get students to think about the coming story and the activities were likely to help the students resort to fewer bottom-up strategies.

Implications

As Aline (1992) says, prereading activities need not be perfunctory. Researchers such as (Ushiro at all, 2004; Carrell, 2000a & 2000b; Carrell & Wise, 1998) reiterated the significance of content schemata in reading comprehension. Indeed a lot of textbooks at the high school level present prereading activities. However the type of activities are often limited to questions. Few textbooks provide pictures or preview vocabularies. In terms of my own project, each activity was independent of the other activities including information on vocabularies and preparatory questions. Thus if I integrate reading with the three preliminary activities, my lessons will likely to be able to provide students with new ways to engage in English reading. In addition as I am aware of the significance of helping my students find pleasure in reading class, I will be able to create an optimal level activity for my students.

Conclusion

Each person has a different reading style and quite a few Japanese English teachers use *yakudoku* methods in their English classes. In fact some students as well as my colleagues might believe English tests on the college entrance examinations do not provide prereading activities, so those activities are of little use. However a number of students were motivated to read stories with the help of the activities and they realized the importance of resorting to different reading tools such as: titles, pictures, background knowledge, and even their own experiences. In addition, there was a greater variety of interactions in class.

It was likely that in this project I was able to observe how my students' way of reading had changed, eventually moving away from the *yakudoku* style at least to some extent. Indeed as the survey and interview showed, there were still some students who reverted to the *yakudoku* approach to reading. However if students stick to poor reading strategies, it is my job and responsibility to help them read more interactively and find more pleasure in reading. I feel hopeful that it will be feasible to change students' reading styles by means of the kind of interventions I used in this project and to help my students use better strategies. I intend to pursue prereading activities and further research on the usefulness of the activities.

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