Linguistic and contextual factors that affect Japanese readers of EFL

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By exploring the linguistic and contextual factors that cause problems for Japanese readers of EFL, this essay adds support to the sociocontextualist side of the ongoing debate regarding the scope of SLA research – that is, should SLA research be limited to the study of language use or should it include language-learning in context? In support of a more global approach, linguistic factors and contextual factors that cause Japanese readers difficulty are explored, including differences in orthography, morphology, orthographic depth, and phrasal structure, as well as ethnocentric influences, enculturated writing patterns, non-motivating classrooms, and enculturated learning strategies. Since Japanese readers are affected not only by linguistic factors but by social factors as well, both linguistic and contextual factors should be considered when teaching and researching second language acquisition.

本論は外国語としての英語学習（EFL）環境にある日本人の読解に関する問題の原因となる言語学的・状況的要因を調査する。さらに、第2言語習得（SLA）研究は言語使用の研究に限定されるべきか、状況に応じた言語学習も含めて行うべきかという昨今の議論において、「社会的文脈」派の立場を支持する。本論ではより包括的なアプローチで、正字法、形態論、正字法深度、句構造等の違いに加え、自文化中心主義の影響、文化適応したライティングパターン、動機づけの低い教室、文化適応した学習ストラテジー等、日本人の読解に関する問題の原因となる言語学的・状況的要因を検討する。日本人の読解力は言語学的要因だけではなく社会的要因からも影響を受けているので、第2言語習得を指導研究する際には、言語学的・状況的要因を考慮すべきである。

After nearly a half-century of cognitivist hegemony, Firth and Wagner's (1997) manifesto supporting "a reconceptualization of SLA… that endeavors to attend to… the *social* and *cognitive* dimensions of S/FL use and acquisition" (p. 286, their emphases) further split an already divided field (cf. Larsen-Freeman, 1991; Berretta, 1991). Gass (1998) countered stating that research should focus on the "*language* used and not on the act of communication" (p. 84, her emphasis). Likewise, after Freeman and Johnson (1998) asserted that "language teaching cannot be understood apart from the sociocultural environments in which it takes place" (p. 409), Yates and Muchisky (2003) responded that by "ignoring the core subject areas of language and SLA research… the field [will] lose any coherence as a separate discipline" (p. 144). To weigh in on this debate regarding SLA's research scope, I contend that for teachers and researchers not to consider context as part of SLA research amounts to professional malpractice, since linguistic factors and contextual factors combine to affect acquisition. In support of this claim, the factors that affect Japanese readers of EFL will be examined - linguistic factors include differences in orthography, morphology, orthographic depth, and phrasal structures and contextual factors include ethnocentric attitudes, enculturated writing patterns, non-motivating classrooms, and enculturated learning strategies.

Linguistic factors
L1 orthography affects English word recognition

Japanese readers of EFL must reduce the negative transfer resulting from different writing systems, as bottom-up word recognition skills remain vital for comprehension (Akamatsu, 1998). Although not disadvantaged in terms of "visual dis-

crimination" speed (Iwai, 2008, p. 47), Japanese students have less experience in the "intraword component… computational analysis" (Akamatsu, 1998, p. 20) required to recognize phonemes compared to English learners whose L1 writing systems are "decomposable phonetically" (Morton & Sasanuma, 1984, p. 26). As such, French or Thai speakers would less likely have trouble distinguishing the three meaning-forming phonemes in the word *thoughtfully* compared to Japanese speakers. This difficulty results from Japan's two types of writing: kana, which are read phonetically, and kanji, which are read visually (Morton & Sasanuma, 1984, p. 40).

As "syllabograms" (Iwata, 2007, p. 253), most kana, i.e. 40 out of 46, follow a consonant-vowel pattern. With no consonant clusters to contend with, "Japanese children learn kana-sound correspondences by rote" (Morton & Sasanuma, 1984, p. 26), relying on memory to attach phonemes to ideographic units. As a result, readers must nurture their analytical skills so that they can more easily bundle constituent units into speech units (Akamatsu, 1998, p. 20). Otherwise, when presented with English words, such as *hotdog* and *McDonald's*, they realize them, instead, as *hottodogu* and *Makudonarudo*.

As "morphograms" (Iwata, 2007, p. 253), kanji pictorially signify nouns and verbs. Even though phonemic units come attached, translating kanji into meaning "proceeds without any phonological activity" (Morton & Sasanuma, 1984, p. 38). One reason for this is the "[high] degree of homophony in Japanese" (p. 38) – phonological decoding does little to assist in accessing meaning. For example, sounding out the word *toukou* - internally or externally – is hardly useful since more than 13 definitions of the word exist. As a result, when kanji are read, the meaning forming "lateral fusiform gyrus" (Sakurai, Momose, Iwata, Sudo, Ohtomo, & Kanazawa, 2000, p. 113) activates, and the "middle occipital gyrus" (p. 113), the area believed to be responsible for "grapheme-to-phoneme conversion" (p. 114), remains inactivated. In contrast, when kana are read, the middle occipital gyrus activates as well (p. 113). Therefore, with not much experience in attaching phonemes to nouns and verbs in Japanese, attaching them to words in English sentences becomes counterintuitive and unnatural.

These "dual processing routes for word recognition" (Aro, 2006, p. 535), one based on sound attachment and the other based on word recognition – both dissimilar to the process of converting "letter clusters" (Akamatsu, 1998, p. 18) into phonemic units – make it difficult for Japanese students to become "good readers" with "superior phonetic segmentation and recoding abilities" (Stanovich, 1980, p. 64).

Differences in morphology affect reading comprehension

Japanese readers have much to learn regarding English morphology. For example, in Japanese there are no inflections on verbs to indicate person or number, but many other types exist, such as negation, desire, probability, obligation, volition, and causation, so relying on the L1 to inform morphological processing is not often an option. Inflections in Japanese are written in kana and attached to kanji, so morphological parsing remains clear (Morton & Sasanuma, 1984, p. 38). On the other hand, parsing in English is more difficult since there is nothing to signal when the "morph ends and the morpheme begins" (p. 38). In order to understand "novel forms such as *fruitpepper* and *reflocking*," students must familiarize themselves with "the constituent morphemes of complex and compound words" (Libben, 2003, p. 221).

Orthographic depth affects word recognition

The orthographic depth hypothesis, promulgated by Katz and Frost (1992) states that "the ability to read a text is dependent… [on] the regularity of transcription of phonemes" (as cited in Spencer, 2006, p. 42). Aro (2006) also suggests that depth depends on "transparency, regularity, and consistency" (p. 532). Japanese became a shallow orthography with a simple grapheme-phoneme correspondence as a result of the Meiji government's (1868-1912) decree to establish a one-to-one relationship between pronunciation and kana (Coulmas, 2002). English, on the other hand, remains a deep orthography, where "grapheme-phoneme correspondences are complex and irregular" (Aro, 2006, p. 532). In fact, "31% of English monosyllabic words are inconsistent (Ziegler, Stone, & Jacobs, 1997, as

cited in Aro, 2006, p. 533), mainly because of the preservation of spelling and pronunciation in loan words and the lack of standardisation until the middle of the 18th century. Another factor that creates orthographic depth in English is its "morphophonemic" (p. 534) spelling system, i.e. the spelling of roots is phonemic (e.g. *kick*), and the spelling of derivatives tends to be morphemic (e.g., in the word *kicked*, *ed* sounds like *t* - not e*d*). As a result of these inconsistencies, reading in English takes two or three years longer to master than other European languages (Seymour et al., 2003, as cited in Spencer, 2006). Beginning readers must, therefore, learn to replace grapheme-phoneme conversion strategies with strategies that encourage the recognition of "units such as rime and whole word" (Aro, p. 532).

L1 phrase structure affects English sentence reading

Another hurdle for Japanese EFL readers is their difficulty in merging individual words into "larger phrase or clause units" (Fender, 2003, p. 305), since their L1 is, structurally, a head-last language. Results from a reading task comparing the word integration skills of a head-first ESL group, Arabic, with a Japanese ESL group, indicate that lexical integration for Japanese speakers takes longer, since parsing prepositions instead of postpositions and placing verbs before objects are not automatic processes (p. 301). To illustrate this difficulty, when Japanese readers are presented with the sentence, "He did not jump on the camera," they are used to reading, "He camera on jump not did." Juffs (1998) indicates that postlexical word processing skills remain challenging even for highly proficient Japanese readers of English (p. 413).

Contextual Factors
Ethnocentric influences affect attitude

Compounding Japanese EFL linguistic-based problems are contextual factors, such as Japan's strong sense of nationalism. Although Japan is the first country in Asia to consciously and deliberately emulate the West, "they did it on their own terms" (Smith, 1965, as cited in Coulmas, 2002, p. 204). As well, the late 19th century drive toward modernization provoked mass "anti-Western nationalism" (p. 212). With suggestions to remove

kanji, and even to adopt the English alphabet resulting in a violent backlash, the Japanese language became known as the "spiritual blood of the people" (p. 212), and a "key symbol of Japan's ethno-national identity" (p. 203). Indeed, whereas high school students in Canada take *English* class, Japanese students take *national language* class. In modern times, nationalistic sentiment still incites debate regarding the "necessity of promoting English language education" (Kawai, 2007, p. 41). With such strong nationalistic sentiment tied to language, individual citizens' motivation to adopt an L2 may falter.

Cultural writing patterns influence formal schemata

As a result of students' culturally learned formal schemata, arriving at the "top-level ideas" (Carrell, 1987, p. 469) of a Western-style English academic text could prove challenging. The contrast between Japan's commonly used "specific-to-general (inductive) pattern" and Western countries' "general-to-specific (deductive)… pattern" (Silva, 1993, p. 664) does little to serve Japanese readers of English, since "rhetorical form is a significant factor, more important than content, in the comprehension of the top-level episodic structure of a text" (Carrell, 1987, p. 476). Readers may have difficulty recognizing the structure of Western-style texts, such as descriptive, persuasive, and cause-effect, which all begin with a thesis, continue with supporting arguments, and then reassert the thesis in the conclusion. This structure differs from Japanese texts, such as discussion, where the topic is introduced, both sides are considered and readers are left to form their own opinions, or the *ki sho ten ketsu* text type, where the *ten* part presents an alternate way of considering the problem. Without enough "multicultural pluralism" (Connor, 1996, p. 7), that is the ability to anticipate the "appropriate formal schema for a particular text" (Carrell, 1984, as cited in Barnett, 1989, p. 46), readers retrieve and retain less information.

Classrooms affect motivation

Japanese high school English classrooms cause readers to lack motivation, since they tend to be overcrowded, teacher-centred, and non-communicative (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008, p. 135). Teachers often focus more on students streamlined

for university, so below-average students may fall even further behind or not feel compelled to study (Atsuta, 2003, p. 14). Reader interest also drops because Ministry prescribed texts are often boring. Japan's enculturated "perfectionistic tendency" (Sumi & Kanda, 2002, p. 824) may also demotivate students from attempting to speak English for fear of making a mistake and shaming themselves in front of their peers. Since the above factors influence students' ability to learn English, reading comprehension also suffers.

Enculturated learning practices affect comprehension

Other contextual factors include the intensive-reading and grammar translation strategies students develop in preparation for university entrance exams (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008, p. 136). Rather than read to learn or for enjoyment – tenets of extensive-reading programs – high school students read intensively to strengthen their analytical and grammatical skills (Iwai, 2008, p. 45). By close-reading short passages for accuracy, students build their vocabulary and attempt to understand, not only meaning, but also how syntax produces meaning (Brumfit, 1978, pp. 175-176). School-taught grammar-translation methods, as well, rather than promote "[thinking] about… meaning in context" (Iwai, 2008, p. 45), emphasize understanding mainly at the lexical level. As a result, students miss out on "process-oriented instruction" that provides "an awareness of the nature of the reading process" (Block, 1992, p. 336). Even after entering university, students continue to "consult their dictionaries every time they come across an unknown word" (Iwai, 2008, p. 47), putting themselves in danger of "forgetting what they have already read" (p. 47).

Concluding discussion

As deduced above, both linguistic factors such as orthography, morphology, orthographic depth, and phrasal structure, and contextual factors such as ethnocentric influence, enculturated writing patterns, non-motivating classrooms, and enculturated learning strategies combine to affect L2 reading comprehension. EFL reading teachers and researchers must take both factors into consideration in order to optimally assist and empathise with Japanese readers of EFL.

The very existence of a debate between cognitivists and sociocontextualists regarding purity, perspective, and practical application could mean that the field of SLA is experiencing growing pains, just as clinical psychology split into applied and cognitive psychology 50 years ago (Barone, Maddux, & Snyder, 1997, pp. 7-8). Since cognitivists draw upon the term *acquisition* in the initialism "SLA" to girder their purist position, one wonders if "SLA" is the correct way to describe the field. Perhaps the categories of Context and Acquisition would be more equally perceived if they were placed under a broader term, such as "Bilingualism". This might make the most sense, since SLA researchers, just like psychologists, are unlikely to change "the way they frame their understanding of learning" (Larsen-Freeman, 2002, as cited in Zuengler & Miller, 2006, p. 46). No matter what term is used, however, it remains true that attempts to get Japanese EFL readers to read logographically cannot take place when external conditions cause them to keep their textbooks shut.

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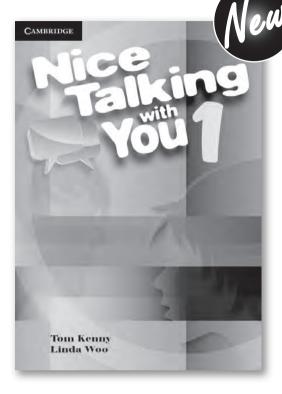
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