EFL Reading in Context

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EFL reading pedagogy in Japan and elsewhere has been greatly influenced by popular approaches in English-speaking countries. Such approaches have tended to include whole language and whole word teaching, which have been shown repeatedly in recent decades to be ineffective for many students. Partly because of the influence of these approaches on L2 teaching in Japan, there continues to be an overreliance on visual memory, an underappreciation of the role of sound in reading (phonemic awareness, phonology, and memory encoding), a lack of focus on decoding and fluency development, a shortage of attention to certain features of vocabulary (morphology in particular), and insufficient teaching of comprehension strategies rather than just testing for it. This article gives a brief overview of the history of reading pedagogy, looks at some of the shortcomings of commonly used teaching approaches, and provides some suggestions for helping to compensate for these shortcomings.

日本において外国語としての英語読解指導は、歴史的に英語母語の諸国、特にアメリカの指導法に大きく影響されている。このように英語母語に由来する指導法は、ホール・ランゲージ／ホール・ワード・アプローチによる言語指導、語彙指導にも至り、今でも広く使用されているが、ここ数十年では、相当な数の学生に効果がないという研究結果が証明されている。これらの潮流の中で、日本での外国語指導は、視覚的記憶に過度に依存し続け、読解時の音の役割（音素声学上の認識、音韻体系、記憶の符号化）を正当に評価せず、流暢さの発達不足や語彙の（特に形態）特徴への注意欠如を招き、単なるテストより、内容把握のための指導法に十分な手立てがなされていない。本稿では、読解指導の歴史的経緯を概観し、一般に使用されながらも効果的でない手法を指摘する。その上で、その手法を修正し、足りない面を補う方法を提案する。

English is a language with great orthographic depth—substantial spelling irregularities between phonemes and graphemes. This makes reading the language difficult to teach compared to languages with more shallow orthographies, something true when teaching the language to native English (L1) speakers and when English is being taught to students who are studying it as a foreign language (EFL; Perfetti & Dunlap, 2008). Over the past 100 years, there have been different approaches to dealing with this challenge, the most dominant of which has been the whole word/whole language approach (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018; Parker, 2019). The shortcomings of this methodology have been clearly highlighted by research on L1 reading pedagogy in recent years (see Dehaene, 2009; Kilpatrick, 2015; Seidenberg, 2017, for a comprehensive description), although it continues to exert influence (Hanford, 2019). Specifically, the whole word/whole language approach fails to account for the importance of (or to train students sufficiently in) phonemic awareness and phonetic awareness (decoding; Castles et al., 2018; Parker, 2019); it does not account for the important connection between expressive oral reading and reading comprehension that can be developed with fluency-building activities (Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011); and often fails to provide sufficient instruction in reading comprehension strategies (Clarke, Truelove, Hulme, & Snowling, 2013).

EFL reading pedagogy has always been greatly influenced by L1 English reading pedagogy (Grabe & Stoller, 2013), particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, a time when applied linguistics as a field and EFL reading pedagogy were becoming established and whole word/whole language teaching was standard L1 practice. Over the years, and particularly in the last few decades, however, considerable evidence has accumulated for how to achieve the best literacy outcomes (Castles et al., 2018). Based on hundreds of hours of EFL classroom observations in elementary, junior high school and high school classrooms in Kanagawa prefecture between 2011 and 2016, Ehara and Murakoshie (2016) have suggested that many of these changes do not seem to have made their way to L2 reading classrooms in Japan. The current situation of L2 reading pedagogy in Japan may thus be described as locally improvised methods such as grammar translation, and insufficient attention to phonemic awareness, phonetic awareness and decoding, fluency training, and comprehension strategy training. One possible reason for this is that EFL

reading pedagogy was developed with an eye to L1 teaching practices, which in the 1970s and 1980s were heavily influenced by whole word/whole language methodology. Understanding this and reappraising EFL reading in light of recent research will likely contribute to making the teaching of reading as a skill in EFL more effective.

A Short History of L1 Reading Instruction

In the 1800s, reading instruction in the US largely focused on the phoneme-grapheme connection and decoding to arrive at meaning. The widely-used *McGuffy's Reader* was used to explicitly teach that connection, using a method that is now called phonics, that is, the explicit teaching of parts-to-whole (Parker, 2019). Readers were encouraged to read by first sounding out the letters to identify words. By the 1930s, however, and the introduction of the *Dick and Jane* reading series, a different type of reading instruction was becoming dominant. Known as the whole word approach (or sometimes the sight word or look-say method), this method stressed the recognition of words as whole units and the memorization of their visual form (Parker, 2019). Teachers made use of easy books with lots of repetition. Very little emphasis was placed on the phoneme-to-grapheme pairings and no attempt was made to teach letter-sound correspondence explicitly (Seidenberg, 2017). The ability to quickly make phoneme-grapheme connections was seen as a skill that would develop on its own as the reader engaged with text (Hanford, 2019). Readers were encouraged to rely on strategies using the context (meaning, structure, visual cues) to recognize words, guess the meanings of unfamiliar words, and make sense of text. As this method became more established and more books became available, exposing students to more texts and just getting them to read became an important focus (Smith, 1973). For this reason, the method is also sometimes called the whole language approach (Kilpatrick, 2015).

Whole language worked well for some students, but not for all (Kilpatrick, 2015). By the mid-1950s, dissenting voices began to emerge because large percentages of students were regularly not reading at level (Parker, 2019). In 1955, Rudolph Flesch published *Why Johnny Can't Read*, in which he claimed that teaching the meaning of whole words rather than teaching the sounds of letters was inefficient and ultimately harming literacy in the U.S. He called instead for the teaching of the sounds of letters (phonics) in a systematic way, kicking off a battle that would go on for half a century between proponents of whole language and phonics. Other voices were raised calling for synthetic (systematic and explicit) phonics teaching (for example, Bond & Dykstra, 1967). However, prominent figures such as Smith (1973), Goodman (1967) and his influential psycholinguistic guessing game theory, and Marie Clay and her popular Reading Recovery program

continued to exert great influence in the 1970s and beyond on curriculum design, reading materials, and intervention programs, and this helped reinforce the hegemony of the whole language approach. This period also saw the rise of applied linguistics as a field, and it is not surprising that EFL reading instruction drew on the then widely-accepted practices of whole language, practices with great intuitive validity, but ultimately based on what has come to be considered "pseudoscience" (Seidenberg, 2017).

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, reading research began to show increasing support for phonics teaching and cast doubt on the efficacy of whole word/whole language approaches (see Hanford, 2018, 2019, for a nice overview). Jorm and Share (1983) found that decoding was the key skill for reading, that it was dependent on knowledge of phoneme and grapheme pairings, and that it was greatly facilitated by phonemic awareness skills (the ability to catch and manipulate sounds). Ehri and Wilce (1985) found that even beginning readers relied more on phonological cues than visual or other cues. Among many other researchers, Byrne and Fielding-Barnsley (1989, 1990) identified letter-sound correspondence (phonetic awareness) and sound identification skills (phonemic awareness) as key reading skills. Stanovich (2000) summed up the shifting importance from visual and contextual to auditory processing in reading that had been observed in a wide array of reading labs: "It [is] the poorer readers, not the more skilled readers, who [are] more reliant on context to facilitate word recognition" (p. 5).

As Gough and Tunmer (1986) had hypothesized in their simple view of reading, reading researchers found that reading comprehension is largely the product of decoding and listening comprehension. That is, reading was first and foremost the process of turning letters into sounds. Good readers decoded and built automaticity with words, transforming them from unfamiliar strings of letters to instantaneously recognizable sight words (Ehri, 2005). Readers decoded and recognized first using sound (Castles et al., 2018). Sound was also crucial for encoding in memory and building the large repertoire of sight words needed for fluent and independent reading (Share, 1995). Phonemic awareness and phonics seemed to be especially effective for helping weak readers (Kilpatrick, 2015).

By the turn of the century, even while whole language continued to hold sway over L1 classroom pedagogy, reading researchers had largely mapped out the essential elements of effective reading instruction arranged in two areas: word recognition, consisting of phonological awareness, decoding skills, and sight recognition; and language knowledge/ comprehension, consisting of background knowledge, vocabulary, language structure knowledge, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge. In 2000, the National Reading Panel in the US undertook a comprehensive review of evidence-based research on

reading. The report clearly stated that the whole language approach was problematic but also showed that phonics only was not sufficient for developing reading skills. It called for a focus on teaching and/or training learners in what it termed "the big five": *phonemic awareness*; *phonics* (to develop phonological skills); *fluency*; *vocabulary*; and *reading comprehension strategies*. Over the last few decades, it has become clear that effective teaching of reading involves the systematic teaching and training of decoding skills to develop automaticity, and that these, in turn are dependent on phonemic awareness. Related to this is the need to develop fluency in sound-letter pairing through extensive use of fluency activities, which also allow learners to experience words in new contexts, build prosodic awareness, and develop word recognition of target words and morphological variants (Rasinski et al., 2011). This frees up cognitive resources for making sense of the message in a text (Castles et al., 2018).

Learning to Read English in Japan: Problems and Suggestions

In addition to the obvious difference of learning a new language without really having been exposed to it much before schooling begins, Japanese learners face significant linguistic and processing issues caused by the different features of Japanese and English (Grabe & Stoller, 2013). English is an alphabetic language. Even learners whose L1s are similarly Romanized alphabetic languages (including more regular ones like Finnish) face a substantial learning challenge when learning to read in English while learners whose L1s are alphabetic languages with different scripts, such as Korean and Thai, face an extra burden. However, learners whose L1s are logographic, such as Chinese and (partly) Japanese, face an even greater burden since they must learn new characters and the alphabetic principle—that rules govern the phonetic system—and practice using those decoding rules to achieve automaticity. Each of these elements—a different script and a non-alphabetic L1—adds an extra layer of difficulty, one that puts Japanese students at a relative disadvantage. Korean students, for example, are able to sound out nonsense words faster than Japanese and Chinese students, who rely more on visual processing of their L1, especially in the early stages of learning to read in English (Kim, Chistiansen, & Packard, 2015; Wang, Koda, & Perfetti, 2003). These processing differences gradually become less important as learners with L1s like Chinese and Japanese become more proficient in English because the basic orthographic-phonological and semantic processes that operate in word reading are actually remarkably similar across languages (Koda & Zehler, 2008). They do, however, affect the early stages of literacy and the amount of time needed to achieve reading automaticity (Koda & Zehler, 2008), meaning that early English readers with a Japanese L1 require copious amounts of decoding and word recognition training. They must do this while also developing general knowledge of and proficiency with English (Spencer & Wagner, 2017).

Authorized textbooks currently used in elementary and junior high school make almost no attempt to teach phonemic awareness (Allen-Tamai, 2019), while phonics is only cursorily dealt with (Carley, 2018). In addition, teachers currently receive little instruction in phonics teaching, either pre- or inservice (Carley, 2018). This lack of attention to fundamental skills in reading is consistent with whole language approaches, where no systematic attention is given to developing automaticity in these skills. This lack of attention to phonics and phonemic awareness persists, despite its effectiveness in L1 reading pedagogy (Castles et al., 2018; Dehaene, 2009; Hanford, 2018) and with EFL learners (Allen-Tamai, 2019; Bunce, 2019; Huo & Wang, 2017; Walter, 2008). For the time being at least, teachers can include more activities to increase awareness of sounds and sound-letter pairings at the early stages (see Allen-Tamai, 2019, for examples). Nursery rhymes, other types of rhyming poems, and stories for recitation could be added to the curriculum to help students adjust to the sounds and phoneme-grapheme pairings of English. Activities connecting phonemic awareness and phonology, such as letter substitution activities based on textbook content can also be effective (McCandliss, Beck, Sandak & Perfetti, 2003). Beyond this, phonics should be greatly expanded and used to comprehensively develop phonetic awareness and decoding skills.

In textbooks and materials used in the early stages of EFL literacy teaching in Japan there seems to be an assumption that after the alphabet is taught, learners are ready for longer texts (Carley, 2018). This assumption rests on the notion that learners can identify words and match them to L1 equivalents, and that they will be able to compare EFL texts to their L1. There is an assumption that at least some L1 knowledge and literacy skills can be brought to bear when analyzing EFL texts. This idea of transfer from the L1 to the L2, is in line with the linguistic interdependence hypothesis of Cummins (1981), which predicts that L1 reading proficiency will transfer to the L2 provided there is adequate exposure to the L2 and sufficient motivation. In other words, the hypothesis sees reading as employing L1 and world knowledge instead of decoding and assembling the message of a text from its constituent parts, an approach now known to develop weak readers (Dehaene, 2009, Kilpatrick, 2015, Seidenberg, 2017). Since learners begin L2 literacy learning with a reasonably well-established L1 and at an age where metacognition and academic skills are at least partially formed, some language skills may indeed be available to students working with the printed L2. However, phonemic awareness, phonological skills, word recognition ability, and vocabulary knowledge (including morphology) need to be developed in the L2, and teachers should not rely on the limited amount of transfer that can take place. Explicit teaching and training are unavoidable.

In junior and senior high school English classes, reading aloud is ubiquitous. This important activity does facilitate a certain amount of phonemic awareness, phonology, decoding, and word recognition; however, there is a shortage of fluency development beyond the language and content of the particular target textbook passages, with gains often diluted by the tendency of learners to just memorize texts. This is problematic, because learners have only limited opportunities to develop the "instant, effortless access" to words, the development of which frees up cognitive resources and allows them to focus on comprehension in other texts (Kilpatrick, 2015). To develop real fluency, learners must see the words in multiple contexts and be trained to recognize them quickly and accurately. This means seeing words out of context (to focus on spelling and grapheme-phoneme pairing) and in different contexts. Techniques to help train fluency beyond reading the target textbook passage seem to be little known or used. Examples include word recognition techniques such as Stoller's (1993) speed training for word recognition and Akamatsu's (2008) letter string speed word segmentation activity. In the former, target letters, words, and phrases are put in the left margin, and multiple similar forms are aligned to the right. The learner is required to read the item on the left and scan the options on the right to find the one that is the same. The latter is a letter string word segmentation task that presents learners with strings of letters containing about five words but with no spaces between the words. The learner is required to draw lines to indicate the word boundaries. Both of these activities should be made with items recently learned by students, including, but not limited to target text passages. Time pressure should be used to encourage faster performance, while accuracy should be expected and tracked, if possible. In addition, dictation of words and short sentences can be very useful, not only for developing word recognition skills but also for reinforcing listening skills and grapheme-phoneme pairing. Teachers can easily make these by lifting words, phrases, or sentences from the text and adding slight variations by, for example, changing tense, number, and part of speech. This can train students to discern sounds, and practice phoneme-grapheme pairings.

The fluency training recommended by the National Reading Panel (2000) includes developing oral reading fluency, which links prosody to meaning (Young & Rasinski, 2017), and helps develop word-sound pairing, word recognition speed, and comprehension (Murray, Munger & Clonan, 2012). As mentioned earlier, fluency training, in the form of reading aloud is very well established in junior and senior high schools in Japan. Repeated reading of the same text, while an important activity, may encourage memorization of forms without helping learners see the range and usage of lexical and grammar items. For this reason, repeated reading with related texts (texts on the same topic, and with similar vocabulary, but not exactly the same as the textbook)

and reader's theater may be better ways to develop oral fluency, rather than only having learners repeatedly read the same text (Young & Rasinski, 2017).

Reader's theater is an activity where a short play is introduced, based on and using language from the textbook unit. The script may contain, for example, a paraphrase of textbook content and an opinion exchange about that content. Students play roles, practice, and eventually perform by reading their parts aloud. This can be done in EFL reading classrooms because it does not add a significantly greater learning burden to the textbook unit, facilitates a focus on phonological features of communication, and allows students to see and feel how target language is used in similar but slightly different contexts. The inherent repetition in these activities, along with the emphasis on expressive reading that reflects text meaning help learners to develop automaticity with the language, not just speed (Rasinski et al., 2011). In high school classes, where speaking is often a low priority, these activities can allow for the introduction of language for discussion and debate as well, while keeping the focus on target text content. In addition, repeated reading with target texts and reader's theater activities allow for exposure to more word family members as well as target vocabulary with morphological variation. Research has shown that authorized textbooks do not do enough to help develop this important knowledge area (Morita, Uchida & Takahashi, 2019).

A final area where recent L1 reading findings may be helpful to EFL reading pedagogy is comprehension strategies. Comprehension strategies have been found to be teachable and effective (Macaro & Erler, 2008; Taylor, Stevens & Asher, 2006) after students have developed automaticity with decoding and word recognition. There are several possible reasons why the teaching of reading strategies in Japan may be under-emphasized. One is that junior and senior high school teachers are generally reluctant to introduce reading passages outside of and unrelated to the textbook. This gives students few opportunities (outside of practice with entrance exam passages) to encounter a variety of text genres or to use various strategies to make sense of novel texts. Another reason is that teachers make great use of the L1 in explaining the content and language features of texts (Ehara & Murakoshi, 2016), and students may become accustomed to waiting for the explanation or translation of a reading passage. Neither of these precludes the teaching of strategies, but they do make teaching them more challenging. Reading comprehension strategies such as self-questioning, recognizing the genre and discourse signals in texts, comprehension monitoring and summarization, and questioning and predicting can all be employed in conjunction with decoding and word recognition, especially with complex texts. Explicit instruction and practice with strategies has been shown to lead to measurable gains in both small and large-scale settings (Taylor et al., 2006). Learners

need to be trained in the use of these strategies (see Clarke et al., 2013 for a description of a comprehensive program) and exposed to novel texts regularly to try them out. Again, as teachers are reluctant to go beyond textbook passages with learners, this can be a challenge. One answer would be for textbook publishers to make related, parallel texts available that can be used for strategy training and practice.

Conclusion

Decoding skills and rapid word recognition skills are essential for all English readers (Castles et al. 2018), and may be even more important for L2 learners working with unfamiliar scripts and sounds (Bunce, 2019; Koda & Zehler, 2008). These, in turn, seem to be dependent on good phonemic awareness. Early L2 literacy instruction thus should include the development of phonemic awareness, phonological skills (through phonics), and fast, fluent, and accurate word recognition.

Intensive teaching and training with decoding, and the building of word recognition skills, may not be given enough attention in English reading pedagogy in compulsory education in Japan, most importantly in the early stages of literacy development. The reasons for this are complex, but may be partly due to the influence of whole language teaching approaches which dominated the L1 reading pedagogy landscape at a time when EFL reading pedagogy was being developed. Whole language teaching did not emphasize important bottom-up language skills such as decoding and word recognition fluency training, nor did it include the development of phonemic awareness.

In addition, recent L1 reading research stresses the importance of training in fluency and strategy use. These are distinct elements of reading and intensive work with them can help improve reading skills. Fluency training options should be expanded beyond multiple readings of target textbook passages so that learners can see words in slightly different contexts and with different morphological forms. More difficult to implement is training in the use of reading comprehension strategies (with a wider variety of text types). This requires students to encounter different texts of different genres but also has potential benefits.

Effective pedagogy derived from research findings over the past thirty years have been slow to spread to EFL reading classrooms. More research specific to the Japanese context is clearly needed, and better training for providers of early literacy instruction is called for. However, to compensate in the short term, teachers may want to incorporate phonemic awareness and phonics activities at the early stages of compulsory education, and then supplement authorized texts with fluency training and comprehension strategies later on.

Bio Data

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