

The Perceptions of Japanese Students toward Academic English Reading: Implications for Effective ESL Reading Strategies

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Introduction

The population of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners has increased significantly in higher education settings in the United States today. There were approximately 583,000 foreign students enrolled in American colleges and universities in the 2006-2007 academic year, more than half of whom were from Asia—students from India, China, South Korea, and Japan represent the first to the fourth rankings respectively (Institute of International Education, 2007). In the 2006-2007 academic year, there were about 35,300 Japanese students enrolled in higher education in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2007).

It has been reported that Japanese ESL students are generally unsuccessful when studying in English speaking countries (Hayes, 1979; Matsumoto, 1994; Miller, 1982; Ota, 1994). Most Japanese students study English in Japan only in order to pass the university entrance examinations that mainly consist of analytical and grammatical skills of reading rather than oral and communicative skills (Butler & Iino, 2005).

In addition, the typical way of reading in English for Japanese students is the grammar-translation method (Mantero & Iwai, 2005). Using this approach, the students depend on English-Japanese dictionaries and translate from English to Japanese word by word. They stop at the point where they encounter an unknown word, and they clarify its meaning completely. Otherwise, they believe that they do not understand a text or piece of information well. It is difficult for them to understand a whole message or the intentions of authors because they do not really think about the

meaning in context, but rather they focus on each word and each sentence so that they know what the Japanese translation is (Kitao & Kitao, 1995).

Having this learning background, many Japanese ESL college students have reading difficulties when they enter the United States. They try to find some strategies that work for academic reading in ESL settings as college students. The primary issues are, how do they figure out more effective reading strategies, why do they think the reading strategies they used in Japan are not appropriate, and in which situations do they have reading problems?

Second Language Acquisition

Previous research suggests that Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers to “the subconscious or conscious process by which a language, other than the mother tongue, is learned in a natural or a tutored setting” (Ellis, 1986, p. 6). In this process, second language (L2) learners do not realize that they are acquiring their L2; rather, they have a feeling that they are using the L2 (Krashen, 1982).

There are three major SLA theories. The first theory is the behaviorist theory. This theory supports the view that L2 learners acquire their L2 when they undertake a lot of repetitions (e.g., drills). From the behaviorists’ point of view, L2 learners need to have opportunities and patterned practices to imitate models and focus on grammar, and their errors should be corrected as soon as possible (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000b).

The second SLA theory is the innatist theory. Dulay and Burt (1974a & 1974b) state that L2 learners acquire L2 in the way that people acquire their first language (L1). Innatist theorists hold that L2 learners learn natural language from teachers, books, and friends, and that they will naturally acquire their L2 without consciousness. In this process errors are

not supposed to be corrected because L2 learners will naturally correct their errors themselves when the appropriate time comes.

Krashen (1982), one of the major scholars of the innatist theory, has distinguished acquisition from learning (the acquisition-learning hypothesis). He also pointed out that when students are challenged to learn a little bit more than their current linguistic abilities (the input hypothesis) and when they have higher motivation and lower anxiety (the affective filter hypothesis), L2 learners (a) monitor themselves (the monitor hypothesis), (b) acquire the grammatical structures of their L2 earlier (the natural hypothesis), and (c) acquire their L2 effectively.

The third SLA theory is the interactionist theory. Interactionist theorists hold that L2 learners acquire their L2 through a lot of interaction with people, emphasizing communication with others and comprehension input. Interaction between non-native English speakers and native English speakers can be negotiated so that the former understand what the latter say (Long & Porter, 1985). For example, native English speakers will use different and clearer words once they find that non-native speakers do not understand what they have said, and also they may use gestures and/or slow down their speaking.

Reading

In order for ESL learners to function in an academic setting, it is essential that they master how to read in English, their L2 (Rivers, 1987; Dubin, Eskey, & Grabe, 1986; Ambe, Falconer, & Leewer, 2004). They learn elements of sentences (e.g., capital letters at the beginning of a sentence, spaces between words, and interrogatives), the structure of texts (e.g., introduction, body, and conclusion), different writing styles for various texts (e.g., poetry, journals, expository texts, narrative texts, and newspaper articles), and so on.

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The more ESL students read, the more they understand the concepts and skills of reading. Vacca and Vacca (2002) point out that motivation, self-concept, and the prior knowledge of ESL learners determine if they read successfully or not. If ESL learners have had school experiences in their home countries, they then know the general idea of what reading is. This background knowledge should make it easier for them to understand the general idea and contexts of what they are reading.

ESL students may have frustration when they transfer vocabulary from their L1 to L2 (Vacca & Vacca, 2002); however, vocabulary is a key element in reading since ESL students need to understand the meaning of vocabulary in order for them to understand the meaning of what they read. They have to understand vocabulary to read content area texts. That is, vocabulary knowledge is significant for ESLs' successful reading (Fitzgerald, 1995).

Orthographic Knowledge

Another issue in reading is orthographic knowledge. Some ESL learners have backgrounds in which they use alphabetic symbols in their L1s, such as German, Spanish, and French. On the other hand, other ESL learners have completely different L1 backgrounds since their L1s are non-alphabetic, including Chinese and Japanese.

The Japanese language is logographic. According to Frith (1985), logography language uses a graphic unit as a symbol that represents meaning. Brown & Haynes (1985) examined how the L1s of the Japanese, Spanish, and Arabic ESL students, who have different language backgrounds, influence their acquisition of L2, English. They found that Japanese students outperformed in terms of visual discrimination, but not in terms of phonology.

Another researcher investigated the word recognition in the Japanese language among Koreans and Chinese who had related L1 background knowledge and English speakers who had unrelated L1 background knowledge (Koda, 1989). The result demonstrated that the Korean and Chinese students performed better than the English speakers on all tests.

This suggests that the relevant orthography knowledge of L1 allows learners to more readily learn L2 lower-level language skills. Therefore, it prompts L2 learners to learn and develop their L2 reading skills. These findings suggest that L1 backgrounds correlate with L2 learn-

ing. In the case of Japanese ESL learners, they have difficulties learning English due to the unrelated L1 backgrounds.

The Study

This study was conducted in order to explore the need for better academic reading strategies for Japanese ESL college students in the United States.

Audiences

The findings of this study will help professors and instructors in the United States who teach Japanese ESL students to understand the Japanese students' reading problems and develop more effective teaching/learning strategies. The findings will also help the ESL students who have similar L1 backgrounds in reading to understand and develop better reading strategies in English in the United States.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perceptions of two Japanese ESL students attending a university in the southeastern part of the United States regarding their academic English reading.

The Research Question

The central research question for this study is: What are the perceptions of these two students regarding their academic reading in English?

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Sub-questions: The guiding sub-questions addressed are as follows:

1. What strategies do the two students use in order to develop their academic reading skills?
2. What do the two students perceive to be the key differences between academic reading in Japan and in the United States?
3. What are the elements that enhance the academic reading skills of the two students?

Methodology

As the researcher in the study, I used a qualitative collective instrumental case study design to explore the perceptions of the two Japanese students regarding reading for academic purposes. A case study

is "an exploration of a 'bounded system' or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context" (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). An instrumental case study focuses on an issue or issues rather than on a case itself in order to provide insight into the issue (Stake, 1995).

Context and Setting

The university in question is a mid-sized university with an enrollment of approximately 14,500 students. Among these are about 300 international students who came from all over the world. In the year the study was conducted, there were 16 Japanese students attending the university, which was about 5.3% of the total population of international students, and about 0.11% of the total student population.

Participants

I purposefully selected two participants with different backgrounds for this study, based on their willingness to participate and their experiences. They are native speakers of Japanese, attending a university in the United States. Pseudonyms were used for the participants in this study.

Mari is a twenty-four-year old graduate student majoring in foreign languages. She received her bachelor's degree in English in Japan. She had experienced two two-week home staying programs in the United States. After completing her studies in Japan, she came to the United States to pursue her masters degree. She has lived in the United States for about one and a half years.

Keiko is a twenty-eight-year old undergraduate student majoring in child and family studies and planning to continue her graduate study in marriage and family therapy at the same university. She received her bachelor's degree in English in Japan. Upon graduation from the college there, she worked at a Japanese company for about five years, and then came to the United States. She also studied English at an English Language Institute in the southwestern part of the United States for about a half year while she was a college student.

Data Collection

I collected data through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the two participants, using open-ended questions so that they could provide their honest voices, thoughts, and experiences and have

opportunities to reflect on their experiences regarding their academic reading. The semi-structured interviews also allowed me to negotiate meanings with the interviewees and gave an opportunity for me to probe for further and deeper information.

The interviews were conducted in the Japanese language. The reason for this was that the participants felt more comfortable expressing themselves and were able to describe themselves more accurately in their native language rather than in English, which was their L2. Each interview was approximately forty-five to sixty minutes in length and was tape-recorded. There was an interval of approximately one week between interviews so that I had time to explore and analyze the responses.

Interview prompts: The semi-structured interview prompts were as follows:

1. Tell me as much as possible about your experiences with academic reading in English in Japan.
2. Tell me as much as possible about your experiences with academic reading in English at a university in the United States.
3. Do you see any differences between academic reading in English in Japan and in the United States?
4. What reading strategies do you use to improve your academic reading at the university in the United States?
5. Could you explain the methods of reading in English that work best for you?

In addition, I asked the participants to bring to the interview any documents that they could use to describe how they process their academic English reading. The interviews and documents were the primary methods of data collection in this study.

Data Analysis

In the first step of analyzing the data, I listened to the tapes in order to obtain a general sense of the content. I thought about whether I needed more data or not. I also transcribed the tapes and translated the contents from Japanese to English language using Microsoft office word 2003. After completing the transcriptions, I asked the participants to make sure my transcrip-

tions were correct and, if necessary, I clarified what they were trying to say.

The second step in the data analysis was to code the data. I divided the data into segments with similar characteristics, labeled them with codes, examined them, and reduced them into themes. I continued this process until saturation was reached, meaning that no new themes were found.

Verification of Research Standards

I built trust with participants in order to gain their honest and thoughtful voices regarding their academic reading. I got to know them by meeting and exchanging e-mails casually before I interviewed them. This allowed them to know who I was and to feel comfortable in the interview with me.

In addition, in order to make the data accurate and correct, I had three of my academic peers review transcriptions. Peer reviews included checking interpretations, methods, and meanings of the research process (Creswell, 1998). Furthermore, I used member checks, in which I asked the participants to check if the findings and descriptions of my study were accurate and correct.

Findings

The perceptions of Mari and Keiko can be classified into three categories: learning strategies, motivation, and environment. There were additional sub-themes in each category.

Learning Strategies

There were four themes under the category of learning strategies; note-taking, using the dictionary, exposure to reading, and purposeful reading.

Note-taking. Mari reflected on her academic English reading in the United States and showed me one of the documents she read for an assignment, an article about language. She said, "These are my reminders so that I can understand what the important points in this article were when I review later." On the document, she had underlined several lines in black. I asked her, "What else did you take notes on from this document?" She answered by showing the star-marks and other underlines, "I did these because I thought they were important, or interesting, or maybe it would be useful for my comment on a reflection paper."

Keiko also showed me her textbooks

when she explained how she takes notes. There were underlines almost everywhere in different colors, and wavy underlines in black, and some sticky-notes on which she had written clearly with bold letters in black ink. She said, "I underlined these definitions because I thought I would be asked about them on my examination."

She also said, pointing to the wavy underlines, "These are important points. I did this so that I can recognize them easily when I read this page again while reviewing." I asked her, "Did you do this in Japan?" She answered, "No."

Using the dictionary. When I asked Mari about her academic English reading experience in Japan, she said, "I translated each sentence from English into Japanese." She also reflected on her experience as follows:

I looked up words I did not know in the English-Japanese dictionary and translated them into Japanese. Even if I understood all the meanings of the words in a text, I thought this was not going to help in reading another text. I knew that when I read a different text, there will be other new words and I will have to look them up in the dictionary again.

On the other hand, when she talked about her reading experience in the United States, she said:

I do not look up words in the dictionary as I used to in Japan, because when I stop to look up a word in the dictionary, I forget what I have read before looking up the word. It takes more time for me to finish my reading.

She showed me a ten-page text she read for her assignment. On the document, there were only a few words for which she had written the meanings of Japanese with a dictionary. She explained:

I changed the way I read after I came to the United States. Now I keep reading even if I come across unknown words. I try to guess what they mean from the context. Now I also think it is okay for me to pick up and understand main points.

Keiko said, "I looked up all unknown words in a dictionary in Japan. It really took a lot of time." When I asked her how she reads texts in the United States, she replied, "I do not use a dictionary as often." She showed me one of her textbooks. On one page, there were only a few definitions she had written in Japanese. I asked her, "For which words did you use a dictionary?" She answered, "I used a dictionary only when I thought they were very impor-

tant in order to understand content. These are definitions.” She pointed out some definitions she had written in Japanese. She continued,

When I tried to remember definitions in English, they did not come into my brain. If I wrote them down in Japanese, it was easier to understand, and I remembered them. I used a dictionary to grasp the meaning of the word in the context.

Exposure to reading. Both Mari and Keiko clearly suggested that reading a lot is an effective way to further their reading skills. Keiko said, “It is training; just read.” She also said, “When I am tired of studying in the library, I pick up a magazine or explore the internet, but still, I am reading.” Mari said, “In the United States, I have to read because this is the environment I am in.”

Purposeful reading. When I asked Mari her experiences of academic English reading in the United States, she said:

One of my assignments is an article review and summary. I have to choose an article on teaching and/or learning vocabulary. When I choose one, I read it roughly. If I find that it is very difficult for me to understand the content, I do not force myself to continue reading. I give it up. Then, I look for another article that is not so hard for me to understand.

She also said, “Because I could not complete my reading within a certain time, I sometimes scanned.”

When Keiko explained her reading experience in the United States, she said, “The way I read varies, depending on the class. I do not read a text if a professor does not use it in class.” She explained further:

Like this text [by showing me her textbook on anatomy], the professor in this class really depends on the text, and examinations really follow the text. So, I read carefully and wrote down important points. But like this class [by showing me her statistic textbook], I do not read it very carefully because there are illustrations and I do not have to memorize terms. Also, I understand the content from my previous knowledge in Japan. It is not hard at all.

After explaining how to use the Japanese language for her reading, she continued, “I use Japanese and English differently, depending on the purpose. It depends on what professors want.” In other words, she tried to understand the content in English if the examinations required her to write the exact same sentences or words. On the other hand, if the examinations tested her

understanding, she used her background or her understanding, with key terms or clues translated into Japanese.

Motivation

Purposes. Both Mari and Keiko explained that their purposes for reading were different between when in Japan and now in the United States. Mari said, “Regarding academic reading in Japan, I think of reading for the university entrance examinations.” Her experience of reading in Japan was mainly based on passing these examinations. When she described her best method of reading, she contemplated for a while and said,

Now I think the purpose of reading in Japan was not to understand content. I just read because I wanted to learn new vocabulary. It was just a tool for my English studies. Here [in the United States], I think I read to understand what is written, to understand content, not to add new vocabulary.

When I asked Keiko about her reading experience in Japan, the conversation was as follows:

Keiko: For tests, the EIKEN Test in Practical English Proficiency, high school entrance examination, and university entrance examination, I studied.

Interviewer: Did you read for anything other than tests?

Keiko: ...Umm... [thinking]...No, no, I did not.

Interviewer: So... basically, you read for tests?

Keiko: Yes.

On the other hand, both participants explained they mainly read for their studies at the university in the United States.

Topics. Mari described her reading experience in Japan, “The topics I read for preparing entrance examinations were always different and the content was very difficult. It was stressful...” She said, “I just read what I was given in school, mainly textbooks.”

When she shared her reading experiences in the United States, she said, “The materials I read are different. They are textbooks and journals related to my major.” She continued, “It is easy for me to read materials about my major. It is not stressful.” She also said, “If I read something I like, I do not dislike reading.”

As Keiko reflected on her reading experiences in Japan, she said, “I read mate-

rials I was given. I did not read according to my interests.” When she talked about her reading experiences in the United States, she said, “I read journals that are related to my major. It is fun because I am interested in them.”

Environment

Time. It was clear that both participants viewed time as a significant element in reading in the United States. Mari compared her reading experiences in Japan to those in the United States. She said, “I spent a lot of time reading at the beginning [in the United States], but it was not good because I could not complete my reading within a certain time...Speed is very important for me. I did not have enough time.” When she told me that she does not use a dictionary as often as she used to do, she said, “I do not have enough time to do that.”

Keiko also explained that the reason she stopped using a dictionary as often in the United States was the lack of time. In addition, when she described that she does not memorize definitions in English, she said, “I do not have enough time.” When she showed me her textbook, she said, “I mark and highlight in the textbook so that I can recognize what the important points are and where they are located [on a page] when I review. I do not have time, compared to native speakers of English.”

Quantity of reading. When I asked Mari about differences in reading between Japan and the United States, the first thing she said was that, “The quantity of reading has extremely increased.” For the same question, Keiko answered, “Now I read a whole textbook. It is natural for me.” When I asked her if she used any strategies to develop her reading in English, she said, “Reading is everywhere in my life here [in the United States].”

Discussion

Interpretations

Participants experienced and perceived their academic English reading in the United States differently from their experiences and perceptions in Japan.

1. What strategies do the two students use in order to develop their academic reading skills?

The conspicuous strategies both Mari and Keiko used to develop their academic reading skills were note-taking and immer-

sion of reading. Note-taking is an effective learning strategy to make students master the content (Slater, Graves, & Piché, 1985). Mari and Keiko took notes so that they could understand what they read, and they highlighted or marked important points in the textbooks in order for them to review the main points when they prepared for examinations or writing reports. Purposes of note-taking are to summarize what students read, grasp main ideas, categorize information, write reports or reflections, and read critically.

Note-taking helps students think about the information they gain from the materials as they read, which helps them understand content clearly. Immersion into reading is another strategy Mari and Keiko used. The more students read, the more they develop their reading skills.

2. What do the two students perceive to be the key differences between academic reading in Japan and in the United States?

The major difference in reading that Mari and Keiko revealed between Japan and the United States was use of the dictionary. Using dictionaries is a key tool for international students. When Mari and Keiko studied in Japan, they depended on an English-Japanese dictionary; they looked up all unfamiliar words in the dictionary.

On the other hand, they rarely use a dictionary in the United States; they use the dictionary only when they think words are very important to understand content. In this process, they distinguish key words in the text, which would not have occurred without understanding the content. In her textbook, Keiko wrote definitions of unknown words in Japanese. She needed assistance in clarifying their meanings because she knew they were essential for comprehension. It was easier for her to understand their meanings in Japanese rather than memorizing definitions in English, which she would easily forget later.

A major concern is that the meaning of one word can vary, depending on the context. Scott & Nagy (1997) suggest that defining words helps students understand their meanings after they come across words in contexts. Defining important vocabulary in context is an effective aid for students to comprehend what is read (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000a).

Mari and Keiko efficiently use dictionaries to comprehend what they read

and learn new words by reading different texts. Mari also guesses meanings of unfamiliar words from context and from her understanding of what she has read so far. "Reading for meaning and guessing from context are both essential" (Haynes, 1993, p. 59). The findings imply that Mari and Keiko modified their reading strategies from when in Japan to the United States. In other words, they shifted the way they read from reading word-by-word to reading sentence-by-sentence or more smoothly. They now try to grasp the whole picture of a text by reading holistically.

There were other differences between time in Japan and in the United States, including the purposes of reading and topics being read. In Japan, Mari and Keiko mentioned that they read for examinations, and they were not interested in what they read; whereas, now they read for their studies to pursue degrees from a university in the United States, and they read something that is related to their majors and interests. Motivation to read is a central point for all age levels (Wigfield, 1997; Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2004). It plays a primary role in L2 learning and affects language achievement (Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997).

Indeed, when Keiko talked about her reading experiences in Japan, she said, "I started to feel tired of reading and then I stopped reading." She also said, "There was no category I liked or disliked regarding topics because I just read whatever I was given to read." Now she reads books and articles for her studies in the United States. They interest her. This facilitates her to read more and gain knowledge from materials. The reading materials are linked to her academic goal, while getting a degree from a university in the United States is another incentive.

3. What are the elements that enhance the academic reading skills of the two students?

Environment influenced both Mari and Keiko to improve their reading skills in the United States. Because they are assigned to read numerous materials, they cannot spend too much time reading only one text. The volume of reading has increased tremendously for them in the United States. They have to read the same amount of materials that the native speakers of English do. But actually, they may need to read more than native speakers of English because they read in their L2, English.

More importantly, they need to understand what they read. The lack of time as well as the increase in quantity of reading causes Mari and Keiko to read differently in the United States, compared to their previous reading experiences in Japan. They applied the same reading strategies they used in Japan at the beginning of their arrival to the United States, but found these strategies were not effective in their ESL setting here. They struggled with reading and tried to find more suitable ways to read appropriately for various purposes.

Suggestions

After analyzing the findings, four recommendations can be offered. ESL college students, English teachers, and professors and instructors of ESL college students in the United States can consider and apply these suggestions.

First, students can take advantage of being aware of the purposes of reading as well as different reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, note-taking, critical reading, and using dictionaries. If they know which reading strategies accomplish the aims of particular readings, they can select them appropriately. This will help them become independent readers.

Second, it is valuable for students to read and understand from contexts, not depending on each word, when they read carefully. During this process, they need to think about what the main point is, what an author is saying in the text, and so on. They can monitor if they understand or not, or if they are meeting the purposes of reading. They can utilize their prior knowledge, too. Reading to comprehend from context is significant. This process involves in-depth thinking.

Third, exposure to various reading experiences is effective in getting a better sense of reading and facilitating their reading skills. The more students read, the more they encounter words and knowledge. They will also see different reading styles, such as newspaper/journal articles, poetry, magazines, expository books, and narrative books.

Lastly, it is crucial for students to be motivated to read. In order to do this, it is recommended that instructors provide topics that interest students, or provide opportunities for students to select materials and topics they would like to read by themselves. When they have autonomy, they are more likely to be motivated (Grolnick, Gurland, Jacob, & Decourcey, 2002).

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