

# Exploring Interactive Approach in Designing Reading Tasks in EFL Classrooms

KATO Shigeo

## 1. Introduction

The present article attempts to design tasks for intermediate-level EFL reading classrooms, aiming at encouraging target readers to have a successful understanding of texts. The primary focus of the task design is to explore the role of activating background knowledge in the process of reading comprehension, especially on the basis of theoretical ground of how text types, or genre of texts, affect the readers' successful comprehension performance (e.g. Nuttall, 1996; Swales, 1990). The actual teaching plan also highlights the availability of three-stage-based interactive approach, i.e. dividing a series of reading activities into pre-, in- (or while-), and post-reading activities during one class period (e.g. Grabe & Stoller, 2002; as for interactive approach of reading comprehension process, see e.g. Barnett, 1989; Eskey, 1988).

## 2. Target context for task designing

### 2.1 General context

Target learners are Japanese EFL student, aged 16 or 17, which approximately correspond to the 1st or 2nd year in senior high school level (upper secondary school level) in Japan. The class size is around 40, with approximately the equal halves of male and female students. In most of the cases, members of a class are fixed in nearly all the subjects, except for P.E. and art classes for instance, and therefore, students are supposed to share significant amount of time with the other classmates, possibly knowing quite well each other, unless the current plan is conducted in the beginning of a school year. This factor needs to be taken into account in designing actual procedure of pair- / group-work activities during classes.

### 2.2 Proficiency level

First of all, the level of target readers' vocabulary and grammatical proficiency needs to be considered. Their expected vocabulary level is approximately 1,000 basic vocabulary items, most

---

Accepted 2003.12.19

Center for Arts and Sciences, Fukui Prefectural University

of which they should have covered after three years of EFL courses in junior high school level (i.e. lower secondary school level). As for grammar points and structures, they should have already learnt basic tense structures, such as present, past, future, present progressive, present perfect, and basic sentence structures, such as interrogatives, negatives, passives, and some modal verbs, plus infinitives and gerunds. Therefore, the approximate level of the target students' reading ability seems to correspond to that of the target learners of, for instance, HEADEAY Pre-intermediate Coursebook (Soars & Soars, Oxford University Press).

### 2.3 Motivation

In terms of the theoretical background of 'instrumental' / 'integrative' dichotomy in the analysis of L2 learners' motivation, it may be reasonable to assume that in the case of Japanese students learning English, particularly those in junior / senior high school level, their motivation is more likely to be integrative rather than instrumental. Since English is not for everyday use in Japanese society, its societal factor may be categorised as 'additive' language learning situations, where 'members of a certain language groups add a second language to their repertoire of skills at no cost to L1 proficiency', rather than 'subtractive' situations, where minority language groups tend to replace the first language by a more prestigious second language (e.g. Gardner, 1979; Lambert, 1975, Stern, 1983). Therefore, learners' motivation in Japanese English education is supposed to be fairly integrative to 'reflect a sincere and personal interest in the people and culture' (Gardner and Lambert 1972).

However, a different viewpoint with a fairly practical connotation needs to be considered, especially with regard to the learning motivation of high school students in Japan. That is, since a significant percentage of high school graduates take entrance exams for tertiary education, their motives to learn English could share the characteristics of instrumental ones. Although many of them may naturally be interested in different cultural values of other countries, societies, or communities, it should be cautiously notified that mind setting of the target students is a complicated admixture of the two types of motivation, as in most of the cases of L2 learning, and instrumental one could even be dominant for some learners.

### 3. Basic principles in designing tasks

In designing a series of comprehension tasks, the following two approaches are set as the main principles; i.e. three-stage-based and interactive-based approaches of reading instruction. In the following sections, theoretical backgrounds for these approaches are presented as underlying

rationales for designing tasks.

### 3.1 Three-stage-based approach

The rationale to divide reading instruction into three stages, i.e. pre-, in- (or while-), and post-reading, comes from schema theory of reading comprehension (e.g. Adams & Collins, 1979; Rumelhart, 1980). Specifically in relation to top-down aspects of reading processes, a body of research analyses argues that efficient pre-reading tasks make critical contribution to a better understanding of texts. To be more specific, previous studies indicate that readers' awareness of text structures and features, such as text types, genres, textual (or discoursal) markers, theme-rheme connections, put a significant impact on successful understanding of texts (e.g. Grabe & Stoller, 2002; p. 219). Post-reading activities also plays essential roles, and they can be the tasks such as getting detailed idea of text structure, identifying main idea and details, recognizing author's main viewpoint, and so on. In the current procedural framework, a cycle of pre-reading to post-reading activities, following a brief introduction, is repeated through dividing a target text into several parts, and ending with a follow-up stage.

In designing actual activities in each reading stage in the three-stage framework, Nuttall's (1996) list of word-attack and text-attack skills, as in Table 1, is very suggestive. Each item in the above list of word / text attack skills can be put in order along with the continuum between bottom-up and top-down aspect of reading processing. For example, word attack skills by structural clues and morphological clues may be allocated in the bottom-up side of the continuum, though inferencing the meanings of unknown lexical items, for instance, may involve to take into account a wider context. Understanding syntax and recognising cohesive devices can also be

Table 1: List of word-attack and text-attack skills (Nuttall, 1996: pp.62 - 124)

Word Attack Skills	Text Attack Skills
1. Structural clues	1. Understanding syntax
a) Grammatical	2. Recognising and interpreting cohesive devices
b) Morphological	a) Interpreting pro-forms (subskill 1)
2. Contextual clues	b) Interpreting elliptical expressions (subskill 2)
	c) Interpreting lexical cohesion (subskill 3)
	3. Interpreting discourse markers
	4. Recognising functional values
	5. Recognising text organisation
	6. Recognising the presuppositions underlying the text
	7. Recognising implications and making inferences
	8. Prediction

categorised as the skills on bottom-up aspect, since they are more related to phrasal and clausal understanding of the text than to integrating higher level propositions or representations of the text on the whole. The text attack skills 3 to 8 in the table are listed approximately in line with the continuum from bottom-up to top-down level of reading processing. This hierarchy of word / text attack skills is quite suggestive when one attempts to design activities in reading classrooms, following the notion of interactive-based model of reading, which is in turn in focus in the next section.

### 3.2 Interactive-based approach

A range of recent L2 reading studies suggest that fluent readers are skillful both in lower-level processing skills, such as letter recognition, phonological / orthographic processing, word identification, lexical / syntactic processing, and so on, and higher-level processing skills, such as predicting, inferencing, integrating propositions / representations, and so on (e.g. Birch, 2002). Furthermore, a body of psycholinguistic studies especially highlighting the role of lower-level processing skills in overall L2 reading performance indicates that fluent readers are good at 'automatic' letter / word recognition and phonological / orthographic processing skills, and therefore, can spend much time in making use of their background knowledge to predict and infer the content of a target text (Ehri, 1992; Just & Carpenter, 1992; Kato, 2002; Nassaji, 2003; Nassaji & Geva, 1999). In contrast, less skilled readers are more likely to be concerned so much with bottom-up aspect of text processing that their reading speed slows down, which may lead to possible impairment of a higher-level information-processing strategies. Some earlier studies already refer to this phenomenon, and Eskey and Grabe (1988 ; p.227) for instance, briefly claims as follows:

In short, for second language readers, especially, *both* top-down and bottom-up skills and strategies must be developed, and developed conjointly, since both contribute directly to the successful comprehension of text.

These analysis of fluent and poor readers can reasonably be a theoretical basis for the justification of interactive models.

On the basis of these theoretical backgrounds of interactive-processing model, suitable combination of reading activities following the categorisation of word / text attack skills presented by Nuttall (see Table 1) can be very useful to lead target readers to develop their overall reading competence. Here, the notion of 'suitable combination' also implies an appropriate allotment of activities to each reading stage, i.e. pre-, in-, and post-reading, and these combinational patterns

may vary depending on text types, genres, and readers' proficiency level as a set of parameters.

#### 4. Target text: See Appendix

#### 5. Tasks

Following the procedure of presenting specifications of task components in Nunan (1989; p. 47), the concepts of each task component are provided in terms of 'goal', 'setting', 'activity type', and 'input'. After mentioning the concepts of these components, overall rationale for each set of activities is presented.

##### 5.1 Pre-reading activities

###### 5.1.1 Activity 1

- 1) Goal: Encourage students to activate background knowledge about the main topic of the target text, i.e. about Major League baseball in the U. S., including some further reference to Japanese professional baseball league as well, helping them be ready for reading, and at the same time, encouraging them to be interested in the content of the target text.
- 2) Setting: Small group work (each group consisting of 3 - 4 students)
- 3) Activity type: Information exchange
- 4) Input:

Let's talk about the following items in your group:

- a) Give any rules of baseball game as you think of in your group.
- b) Give any name of major league baseball team in the U.S.
- c) Give any name of famous baseball player in major league in the U.S.
- d) Give any name of Japanese baseball players who are now playing in the U.S. major league.
- e) Look through 1st and 2nd paragraph very quickly and pick up any words and phrases which seem to be related to baseball.

###### 5.1.2 Activity 2

- 1) Goal: Encourage students to recognise the genre of the target text and its basic textual organisation, helping them be prepared for reading by providing them with useful information on formal / structural aspects of the target text.
- 2) Setting: Small group work (each group consisting of 3 - 4 students)

3) Activity type: Brainstorming, opinion exchange

4) Input:

Let's talk about the following points and try to find the answers in your group:

a) Which genre do you think the text we are going to read belongs to?

Choose the closest one from the following.

- newspaper article   - biography   - essay   - obituary   - novel  
- report   -journal

b) What kind of textual organisation is characteristic to the genre you chose in a)? Try to raise any points you can think of in your group.

### 5.1.3 Rationale for pre-reading activities

Carrell and Eisterhold (1988) presents the conceptual framework of content and formal schemata and suggests that it is useful to draw a distinction between them in teaching L2 reading comprehension. The content schemata are equivalent to background knowledge of the content area of a target text, and the formal schemata are that of structural / rhetorical organisation of different textual types. The usefulness to distinguish between these two kinds of schemata may be that it could be beneficial for readers to be encouraged to activate, or reinforce if necessary, their background knowledge in terms of these two kinds of schemata. Based on this theoretical ground, it can be assumed that designing tasks in terms of these two types of schemata, intending to help learners be prepared in pre-reading stage, is very effective to lead to the in-reading stage. In this respect, activity 1 above, on the one hand, intends to focus on activating students' content schemata, and activity 2, on the other hand, aims to activate their formal schemata.

Regarding the choice of whether or not students are encouraged to use the target language during group work, they may not necessarily be forced to use their target language, especially if the primary focus of the activity is put on tackling the tasks themselves in relation to individual reading which happens in parallel. Though it is, of course, possible to make tasks integrative through encouraging students to use the target language, one would choose to concentrate on helping them activate their background knowledge more actively and freely by the use of their native language, hence trying to put a priority to a preparation for the main reading stage.

## 5.2 In-reading activities

### 5.2.1 Activity 1

1) Goal: Encourage students to get the meaning of new vocabulary items before reading.

## Exploring Interactive Approach in Designing Reading Tasks in EFL Classrooms

- 2) Setting: Individual work (Students can talk freely with each other, if necessary.)
- 3) Activity type: Scanning
- 4) Input:

From the specified part of the text, try to find a word which seems suitable to each blank in the following sentences. (Initial letters are given.) Word forms may have to be changed from the original form you find in the text.

- a) I just can't help a \_\_\_\_\_ him for his courage. (1st - 3rd paragraph)
- b) I have a strong c \_\_\_\_\_ that she is innocent. (1st - 3rd paragraph)
- c) He fell a v \_\_\_\_\_ to her mysterious charms. (4th - 6th paragraph)
- d) Don't d \_\_\_\_\_ yourself about such a tiny mistake. (7th - 9th paragraph)
- e) The teacher d \_\_\_\_\_ herself to teaching English. (10th - 12th paragraph)

## 5.2.2 Activity 2

- 1) Goal: Encourage students to pick up main events from the text and help them have a better understanding of the textual organisation of the text
- 2) Setting: Pair work
- 3) Activity type: Arranging in order, skimming, scanning
- 4) Input: Next page

## 5.2.3 Rationale for in-reading activities

In the pre-reading stage, students were encouraged to activate their content and formal schema, which was intended to help students focus on top-down aspect of text processing before reading. In the in-reading stage, the first activity in turn aims at introducing new lexical items through scanning the text, intending to focus on bottom-up side of reading, based on the concept of interactive approach mentioned in 3.2. However, it should be pointed out that even though the activity seems to concentrate on new lexical items, guessing their meaning will inevitably involve the consultation of nearby contexts around them.

The second activity in this stage is intended to encourage students to get the content of main episodes through reading the text, following the information on formal schema which they have already found in the pre-reading stage. It needs to be noted here that the activity would become a simple scanning task when many of the expressions used in individual sentences are

identical to those in the original text.

(Each pair is given six strips of paper and word list below)

Read the following instruction and work out in your group:

- a) First, try to guess which word in the word list will fit to each blank on each strip of paper. You are not expected to look at your textbook this time.
- b) Look at your textbook and try to put each sentence in an order of events mentioned in the textbook.
- c) Find expressions indicating the time of each event and write them down on each strip of paper.

Roberto (            ) Puerto Rico after finishing amateur baseball tournament.  
TIME EXPRESSION:

An extraordinary big (            ) attacked Managua, Nicaragua. TIME  
EXPRESSION:

Roberto accomplished his 3,000th hit and became (            ) player who  
made so many hits.  
TIME EXPRESSION:

Roberto was chosen to be the member of baseball's hall of fame, being a  
(            ) Latin American to be selected.  
TIME EXPRESSION:

Because of an urgent request for rescue, Roberto took the risky (            )  
to Managua and the accident happened.  
TIME EXPRESSION:

Roberto traveled to Nicaragua to join an amateur baseball tournament as a  
(            ) of his team.  
TIME EXPRESSION:

**Word list: eleventh    second    flight    earthquake    manager  
                 returned    first    seventh    fire    traveled**

### 5.3.1 Post-reading activity

1) Goal: Encourage students to try to be aware of the content of presupposition, or shared assumption, which the author doesn't mention explicitly in the text, and nevertheless, should be helpful for the readers to get a more proper understanding of the text



## Exploring Interactive Approach in Designing Reading Tasks in EFL Classrooms

- 2) Setting: The activity can be basically set as an individual work, but later it can be developed as pair / group work to encourage students to talk freely about the topic.
- 3) Activity type: Inference and making decisions
- 4) Input:

Regarding with the following question, think about the possible background assumptions which the author of this text seems to have in his mind but not stated in the text.

Question: Why was Roberto Clemente so eager to help those who lived in a country where he was not from?

### 5.3.2 Rationale for post-reading activity

The current target text was originally written, presumably, for young readers in North America, as its source suggests, and therefore, there were very few parts which refer to, for instance, the solidarity bound by very similar historical background of across Latin America, various racial problems of the immigrants from Latin America in the United States, common religious tradition of devout Catholic in the area, and so on. However, these points could be crucial to help readers get deeper understanding of Roberto's strong motive to be engaged in his rescue work in Managua.

Many of the target learners, who were not included in the writer's intended reader of the text, and therefore clearly without the shared assumptions mentioned earlier, could possibly have a difficulty to draw on those presupposed items, or even unnoticed to them unless they are urged to be aware of them during reading. Thus, it may be meaningful to encourage them to be sensitised to a possible existence of presupposition which the author tacitly unstated but seems to play an important role for more suitable understanding of the text.

## 6. Conclusion

In designing various activities in teaching L2 reading comprehension, seeking the proper and effective form of interaction between bottom-up and top-down processing may be one of the most crucial tasks. And the balance of these two types of processing can vary according to the proficiency level of target learners. For instance, when helping learners whose linguistic knowledge is lower than those in the context provided in the current article, it may be helpful for them to provide more detailed contextual backgrounds about the topic of a target text in pre-reading stage, so that

they could make use of effective prediction and inferencing strategies with the help of additional information. On the other hand, when teaching learners whose bottom-up knowledge is in higher level, one could present smaller amount of information on both content and formal schemata in pre-reading stage, so that more room for prediction and inference is left to them for in-reading stage.

However, a question of what kind of background information one needs to provide in order to lead learners to have more effective reading seems to be a challenging task because of the fact that, as McDonough (1995; p. 34) suggests, a person engaged in reading comprehension not necessarily shows a clear physical reaction or signs as for their own degree of comprehension. In other words, it can be said that reading is very internal and individual-based activity. In this sense, reading teachers always have to bear in mind that every single activity can yield different impacts to different learners depending on learning contexts, and may not necessarily reveal a distinctive, clear-cut correspondence to a certain tangible skill-development of each learner.

#### References:

- Adams, M.J. & Collins, A. (1979). A schemata-theoretic view of reading. In R. O. Feedle (Ed.) *New Directions in Discourse Processing* (pp. 1 - 22). Norwood, J.J.: Ablex.
- Anderson R. C. & Pearson P. D. (1988). A Schema-theoretic View of Basic Process in Reading Comprehension. In P. L. Carrell, J. Devine, & D. E. Eskey (Eds.), *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading* (pp. 56 - 70). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Barnett, M. A. (1989) *More Than Meets the Eye: Foreign Language Reading Theory and Practice*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Birch, B. M. (2002). English L2 reading. Nahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Carrell P. L. & Eisterhold, J. C. (1988). Schema Theory and ESL Reading Pedagogy. In P. L. Carrell, J. Devine, & D. E. Eskey (Eds.), *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading* (pp. 56 - 70). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ehri, L. C. (1992). Reconceptualising the development of sight word reading and its relationship to recoding. In P. B. Gough, L. C. Ehri, & R. Treiman (Eds.), *Reading acquisition* (pp. 107 - 143). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Eskey, D. E. (1988). Holding in the Bottom. In P. Carrell, J. Devine, & D. E. Eskey (Eds.), *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading* (pp. 93 - 100). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Eskey, D. E. & Grabe, W. (1988). Interactive Models for Second Language Reading: Perspectives on Instruction. In P. Carrell, J. Devine, & D. E. Eskey (Eds.), *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading* (pp. 93 - 100). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gardner, R. C. (1979). Social psychological aspects of second language acquisition. In H. Giles &

## Exploring Interactive Approach in Designing Reading Tasks in EFL Classrooms

- R N. St. Clair (Eds.) *Language and Social Psychology* (pp. 193 - 220). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gardner, R. C. & Lambert, W. (1972). *Attitudes and Motivation in Second-Language Learning*. Rowly, MA: Newbury House.
- Grabe, W. & Stoller, F. L. (2002). *Teaching and Researching Reading*. London: Longman.
- Just, M. A., & Carpenter, P. A. (1992). A capacity theory of comprehension: Individual differences in working memory. *Psychological Review*, 99, 122 - 149.
- Kato, S. (2002). *Interaction between Processing and Storage in L2 Reading: Evidence for Developmental Changes in Japanese ESL Learners*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Essex.
- Lambert, W. E. (1975). Culture and language as factors in learning and education. In A. Walfgang (Ed). *Education of Immigrant Students*. (pp. 55 - 83) Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- McDonough, S. H. (1995). *Strategy and Skill in Learning a Foreign Language*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Nassaji, H. (2003). Higher-level and lower-level text processing skills in advanced ESL reading comprehension. *Modern Language Journal*, 87, 261 - 276.
- Nassaji, H., & Geva, E. (1999). The contribution of phonological and orthographic processing skills to adult ESL reading: Evidence from native speakers of Farsi. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 20, 241 - 267.
- Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nuttall, C. (1996). *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Rumelhart, D. E. (1980). Schemata: The building blocks of cognition. In Spiro, R. J., Bruce, B. C., & Brewer, W. E. (Eds.) *Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension* (pp. 33 - 58). Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.
- Stern, H. H. (1983). *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre Analysis*. Glasgow: Cambridge University Press.

## Appendix:

## Roberto Clemente

Introduction: Baseball has a lot of heroes. Some of them are famous not only for their dedication to baseball, but also for their concern for people in need. Roberto Clemente is one of these heroes.

Text: For more than a decade he had been one of the greatest baseball players of all time. He could hit, run and throw with power and grace. And on September 30, 1972, Roberto Clemente of Puerto Rico and the Pittsburgh Pirates was just one hit short of three thousand hits. Only ten other players in the 103-year history of the game had made so many hits.

At three rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh, over thirteen thousand Pirate fans were hoping for Roberto's success. Throughout Latin America, hundreds of thousands more sat listening to their radios, waiting for the historic hit. The pitcher threw a fastball and the Pirate star hit the ball hard. It went deep into left-center field. It was a two-base hit. The fans roared with delight. But they didn't know that that this was to be Roberto's last.

When the baseball season ended a few days later, Roberto returned to his home In Puerto Rico. At that point, he was the greatest sports hero in all of Latin America. But he was not admirable only when he was on the playing field. Off the field, too, Roberto Clemente was a man of conviction and strength. He had won fame and money through baseball, but he hadn't forgotten that most people In Latin America were poor. He felt he had a duty to help those who hadn't been as lucky as he had.

He volunteered to manage an amateur Puerto Rican baseball team. In November, the team traveled to Nicaragua to play in a tournament. While Roberto was in Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, he met a fourteen-year-old orphan named Julio. Julio had lost both his legs in an accident, but had no money for a wheelchair or artificial legs. Roberto arranged to get Julio a pair of artificial legs. On December 6, when the baseball tournament was over, Roberto flew back to Puerto Rico to be with his family.

About three weeks later, a terrible event took place. On the morning of December 23, a huge earthquake hit Managua. It killed over six thousand people and left another twenty thousand injured. Although it was Christmastime and the Clementes had planned holiday celebrations, Roberto did not hesitate. He quickly organized the Puerto Rican Relief Fund for Nicaragua.

Roberto put all his energy into the relief work. On television and radio, he urged people to give whatever they could to help the victims of the earthquake. He collected food, medicine and clothing. He forgot all about eating and sleeping. There was no Christmas-as-usual for Roberto and his family.

The biggest problem Roberto faced was how to get the supplies to Nicaragua. He arranged to have a cargo ship transport most of the supplies. But the ship was slow. For speed, planes were needed. Roberto organized three special flights Managua. They carried the vital supplies that were needed immediately.

To most people, it seemed that Roberto had done all he could. But on the morning of December 31, there was an urgent request from the rescue workers in Managua. They needed

more medical supplies, a water pump, and an X-ray machine. Roberto decided to take the things to Managua himself. Many of his friends were distressed. It was New Year's Eve, and they thought he should stay with his family. They asked him to spend the holiday at home and go to Managua later. But Roberto insisted on making the flight. "I have to go," he said. "Those people are my friends. The least I can do is to be with them tonight. And I need to find Julio. I need to see if he is all right. Besides, there are babies dying over there; they need these supplies."

The plane Roberto rented was a twenty-year-old DC7. It had been in two minor accidents. It had not flown in over four months. But it was the only one available. Roberto did not know whether the plane was safe. He decided, however, to take the chance because he knew it was critical to get the supplies to Managua.

Two colleagues from the relief effort volunteered to go along. The three men and the pilot and copilot were ready to go by four o'clock that afternoon. But the plan still needed some mechanical work.

A little after 9 p.m., the plane was ready. It sped down the runway and took off. But suddenly it disappeared from the radar screen in the control tower. Moments later, the plane carrying Roberto Clemente and the other four men crashed into the Atlantic Ocean. Roberto's body was never recovered.

Until his tragic death, many people had not been aware of Roberto's selfless dedication to the people of Latin America. Within a few days, however, word of his actions had spread around the world. People in Latin America and the United States held silent marches to honor him. The following year, he was elected to baseball's hall of fame. He was the first Latin America to be so honored. But Roberto Clemente was more than a hero to baseball fan. He was a hero to everyone.