

The Impact of Reading Experience in Japanese on English Proficiency

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1. Introduction

This study examines the impact of reading in Japanese on English proficiency both qualitatively and quantitatively. Rapid globalization has required people to become more proficient in English and the social tide is flowing towards English education in early childhood. However, Otsu (2007), like many other experts, insists that this is rash. He argued that school systems such as teachers, curricula and textbooks were not ready yet. In addition, elementary school children are too young to understand and deal with a second language logically. He emphasizes that it is much more efficient and effective to wait until their brains have developed enough to construct firm ideas before teaching them English. Saito (2017) argues that learners should understand their mother tongue well and be sophisticated speakers before learning a foreign language. As these scholars also agree, it is almost universally acknowledged that reading in one's mother tongue aids the acquisition of solid language skills. If you possess a high level of competence in Japanese, then you will probably show the same skills in English as well. I would like to examine how reading experience in Japanese influences English proficiency through qualitative and quantitative analysis of a questionnaire and interviews with EFL learners.

My research questions are: ① How does reading in Japanese influence English proficiency? ② What aspects of Japanese competence affect English performance skills? In this study, the mixed method is employed in order to observe various aspects both qualitatively and quantitatively. First, the author conducted a survey in order to examine the relationship between reading experience in Japanese and English learning. Next, interviews were held with 17 people to seek more detailed information. The interviews were transcribed in Japanese and the text was divided into segments after grasping the outline of each interview. Then, the author allocated a code to each concept. Finally, the codes were categorized into common themes.

2. Seminal Works

The current study considers promotion of reading to be a very important element in enhancing children's mother language ability. On this topic, Fujioka (2018) reports reading activities in the UK. School children read levelled readers in groups, and they often have assignments called "home reading" in which they submit a reading-record book to earn points based on how much reading they have done. Healy (1990) describes how people no longer read much in the US. As a result, only 5% of high school graduates could satisfactorily understand the materials which had been traditionally used at college level. Regarding the importance of reading in Japanese, Inohara (2016) pointed out a positive correlation between quantity of reading and vocabulary and reading comprehension skills among Japanese elementary school children. Hirai and Shitara (2014) found that students who like reading are more likely to have a higher level of scholarship and that reading is a significant aid to children in their development of language competence. In regard to the relationship between Japanese and English competences, Sanmori (2003) argues that being a master of Japanese is an essential foundation for becoming a master of a foreign language, since language ability and performance skill are universal in any language. Although these studies are very valuable, they make no direct reference to the impact of reading in Japanese on English proficiency.

My research method was inspired by the following studies. Takeuchi (2007) interviewed 18 'masters' of English and summarized these oral histories to show how they had learned English. Nasu (2015) conducted interviews to identify the role of literature in language learning and concluded that reading literature may be one of the best ways to improve one's target language. These findings provide useful guidance for English learning. However, these studies, again, do not refer to the relationship between reading in Japanese and English learning. In addition, the level of interview analysis is not deep enough to examine the impact of reading in Japanese on English proficiency. It is hoped that this study will fill this gap to contribute to a better understanding of how reading in Japanese helps English learning.

3. Survey Results

The questionnaire was given to 326 Japanese university students and 10 workers in order to ask about their reading experience in Japanese, and English learning. Among the university students, 246 students majored in humanities while 80 students were science majors. 234 people (69.7%) out of 336 answered that they used to like and enjoy reading in their childhood. Out of these 234, 97 people said that they are now good at English. In particular, 12 people (5.1%) said that they are now very good at English. On the other hand, 37 people out of the 102 who were not very positive about reading when they were small, answered that they are now good at English. Among them, only one person (0.9%) answered that he or she is very good at English. From these results, it appears that people who liked reading in their childhood are more likely to have a positive attitude toward English. However, the respondents' English level was entirely self-assessed. It should be noted that the answers were rather subjective and the respondents might have hesitated to make a positive choice.

4. Interview Analysis

After careful examination of the questionnaires, 17 people, who mainly answered that they used to like reading in their childhood and claimed to have a high level of English competence now, were selected in order to investigate the relationship between reading in Japanese and English proficiency. Through these interviews, I have reached three main findings. First, the family has big impact on children's reading habits. For example, quite a few interviewees remember that their parents (often mothers) would read picture books to them when they were small. Many interviewees would often borrow books from their school library or visit a library in the neighborhood with their family member(s). Furthermore, many of them said that their family member(s) also liked reading and they would choose and read books together.

Next, the responses revealed a clear link between reading in Japanese and a positive attitude toward Japanese as a school subject. 14 interviewees out of 17 said that they used to like Japanese class and gained good grades at school. In addition, 10 people said that they were good at Japanese composition as well. When reading books, the ability to imagine the background and read between the lines helps you understand the context. Reading should, therefore, be good training for children in using their imagination. In particular, reading seems to help improve proficiency in Japanese writing. Exposing oneself to literary works may be one of the most significant tips on how to write good Japanese and achieve advanced writing skill.

Now, how do the interviewees understand the correlation between their Japanese competence and English performance skill? 16 people out of 17 said that they are currently good at English. Many of the interviewees recognized that a high level of Japanese competence is an essential factor in the acquisition of sophisticated English. It is worth noting that the interviewees realized that their Japanese competence had helped them learn English, when reading and writing. They applied their knowledge of vocabulary and expressions in Japanese to reading and writing in English. From these results, it seems reasonable to say that a correlation between reading in Japanese and English proficiency has been identified.

On the other hand, some of the interviewees said that they could not find any positive correlations between Japanese and English because they are completely different languages. I would like to examine why they think so and how they learned English without depending on their Japanese competence in further research.

5. Conclusion

This paper suggests that those who read many books in their childhood tend to have a positive attitude toward Japanese class at school. It can also be argued that reading has enriched their imagination and developed their Japanese competences, such as vocabulary, sense of accuracy, and writing skill. As a result, reading in Japanese offers a good chance to improve their ability to guess meanings and handle contexts logically. These skills seem to be useful for language performance in both Japanese and English. Most significantly, we can infer that reading in Japanese helps improve English performance skills such as guessing the meanings of new words, understanding the context, and choosing appropriate vocabulary and expressions.

While the findings made through the analysis of EFL learners' testimony are significant, further studies

are necessary to support and develop the current study. One such study would be an investigation of their actual level of English performance and what kind of English they can deal with.

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