

A Study on the Correlation Between Reading in Japanese and English Proficiency: A Qualitative Analysis of Interviews With EFL Learners

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study is to investigate the correlation between reading in Japanese, especially in childhood, and English proficiency. Although several previous studies have discussed the importance of reading in building solid mother language ability, little is known about how reading in Japanese influences English learning. The author had 336 EFL learners complete a questionnaire, and held interviews with some of the respondents, mainly those who used to read extensively in their childhood and currently claim a high level of English proficiency. Through the qualitative analysis of the interviews with EFL learners, this paper attempts to clarify the effects of reading in Japanese and how it improves linguistic performance both in Japanese and in English. It also offers some suggestions for the future development of English language education based on its findings.

1. Introduction

Rapid globalization has required that people become more proficient in English and English education at early ages has been drawing more and more attention in Japan. The process of dealing with and understanding English as a foreign language, however, has much to do with how proficient your Japanese is. A number of experts, such as Saito (2002), who argues that reading in one's mother tongue aids the acquisition of high-level language competences, have recommended that young children read extensively in order to become proficient in their native language. Furthermore, many scholars insist that solid Japanese ability is fundamental to foreign language learning. Saito (2007), for example, argues that no one can be more proficient in a foreign language than in their mother language. There is little evidence, however, that reading in Japanese leads to high level English proficiency. The current study, therefore, aims to investigate the correlation between reading in Japanese and English proficiency, and to show evidence that reading in Japanese affects English performance.

In this paper, how reading in Japanese affects English proficiency will be examined by

conducting a survey and holding interviews with EFL learners. The author analyzes the interviews with EFL learners who have read many books in Japanese and are supposed to have a high level of English proficiency. By doing so, the author will clarify the effects of reading in Japanese on linguistic performance in both Japanese and English. The current study ultimately aims to contribute to language education by suggesting long-term but reliable effects of reading, which constitute basics of linguistic competence.

2. Critical Review of Previous Studies

The previous studies related to this study mainly concern either the importance of Japanese as a mother tongue or the relationship between L1 and L2. The major studies are divided into the following categories: (1) Apprehension for acceleration of English education in early childhood, (2) The importance of reading in building solid Japanese language skills, (3) Reading and language education in other countries, and (4) The relationship between L1 and L2 education. Before presenting my own analysis, I would like to review some of the most relevant studies.

2.1 Apprehension for Acceleration of English Education in Early Childhood

English language education seems to be one of the hottest topics in the current Japanese society and the social tide is flowing towards English teaching to children at younger ages. Is it true, however, that the earlier children start to learn English, the more efficiently they will acquire English? Quite a few researchers are concerned that too much input of English might spoil Japanese language skills. Tsuda (2006), for instance, points out that we should reduce the number of English classes and put Japanese language instruction in the very center of whole education. A number of scholars argue that we should build a high level of mother language skills, to begin with. Otsu (2007) insists that 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) also states that being a sophisticated speaker of Japanese is the first step for us to take. He argues that it is totally impossible that someone who is slothful about speaking good Japanese becomes a great English speaker (See also Yamada, 2005).

2.2 The Importance of Reading in Building Solid Japanese Language Skills

Concerning (2), several studies have pointed out the positive impact of extensive reading in Japanese on vocabulary and reading comprehension skills. Inohara (2016), for instance, examined the relationship between quantity of reading and vocabulary and reading comprehension skills among Japanese elementary school children. The purpose of his study was to confirm whether there was a positive correlation between reading and the language proficiency of Japanese elementary school children, a subject which has been little studied in Japan. In his research, 992 elementary

school children completed a questionnaire. In order to measure how much reading children did, Inohara asked them the number of books borrowed from the school library. He also conducted a reading test to measure the examinees' vocabulary and reading competences. He concluded that there is a positive correlation between amount of reading in Japanese and vocabulary and reading comprehension skills.

Hirai and Shitara (2014) also attempted to investigate the role of reading in Japanese and how it helps the improvement of Japanese language competence. They asked 213 university students about their reading habits and attitudes. The results showed that about 70% of the students began to like books (or picture books) before they entered elementary school. This indicates that children can become interested in books even though they cannot read the characters. They also point out that reading to children plays an effective role in encouraging them to become more interested in books.

As these scholars agree, reading seems to be an effective way for young children to develop their language competence. Their studies, however, are limited to clarifying the effect which reading in the mother tongue has on one's mother language competence.

2.3 Reading and Language Education in Other Countries

Overseas situations should shed further light on the relationship between reading and mother language education. In fact, reading seems to be recognized worldwide as a prominent factor in the establishment of solid language skills. As Fujioka (2018) reports, school children in the UK, especially in lower grades, conduct reading activities in groups using levelled readers, which have fewer words and are easier to read than graded readers. Children often have assignments called "home reading" in which they submit a reading-record book. This includes the title of the book, the date, and how many stars they give the book. The students also earn points based on how much reading they have done. Parental involvement is also strongly encouraged. According to Perkins (2015), parents are asked to write an appropriate comment on home reading and book clubs for parents also hold meetings in order to inform them about the reading policy of the school.

The weakening of children's language competence has been a big social issue in the United States as well. It was already being discussed in 1990 by Healy, who reported that only 5% of high school graduates could satisfactorily understand the materials which had been traditionally used at college level. She explained that this was because people no longer read much. Worrying data had revealed that 80% of the books published in the United States were read by merely 10% of the citizens (Healy, 1990).

2.4 The Relationship Between L1 and L2 Education

The current study is mainly concerned with the relationship between L1 and L2 education, so finally I would like to review what has been discussed in this field. As many scholars have argued, L1 and L2 seem to be closely related in various ways. Fujita (2018) argues, from the viewpoint of

contrastive linguistics, that quite a few Japanese learners have failed to successfully master a foreign language mainly because they have not studied their own mother language well. Those learners are eager to study a foreign language but are lacking knowledge of Japanese. Possessing knowledge of both mother tongue and foreign languages will make language learning more fruitful. He also suggests that foreign language textbooks and teachers engaged in L2 education should be more conscious of the importance of the mother tongue.

Fukaya (2019) illustrates the effectiveness of an extensive reading (ER) program introduced in the EFL classroom as a means to promote university students' reading. She suggests that an ER program has a positive impact on learners' attitude towards reading in English. In addition, it seems that increased reading in English leads to increased reading in Japanese at the same time. Active efforts to promote ER may boost students' motivation to read in Japanese as well (See also Yamashita, 2004).

2.5 Summary: Purpose of the Current Study

As observed above, acquisition of sophisticated language skills in the mother tongue is considered to be essential for young children and reading seem to play an important role in the establishment of solid language competences. In addition, L1 and L2 language performances seem to affect each other. In particular, a positive attitude towards reading, both in L1 and L2, facilitates learners' performance in reading. Although these previous studies have such significant implications, they do not refer to the relation between reading in Japanese and English proficiency. The current study aims to offer suggestions which may help the future development of English language education through the examination of the correlation between reading in Japanese and English proficiency. In the sections that follow, I will investigate how reading in Japanese affects English learning by qualitatively analyzing interviews collected from Japanese EFL learners.

3. Research Method and Analytical Framework

In this section, I would like to present the research method and analytical framework which the current study adopts. The author conducted a survey in order to investigate the relationship between reading experience in Japanese and English learning. Then, interviews were held with 17 people to seek more detailed information. As to research method, I refer to the oral history method, which records the summary of the interviews with the parties concerned. Also, for the interview analysis, the current study applies the framework which arranges the content analysis method. I will explain the details below.

3.1 Oral History

Takeuchi (2007) attempts to investigate effective methods to learn English by conducting

interviews with 18 contemporary ‘masters,’ and summarized these oral histories to show how they had learned English. Nasu (2015: 229-247) also reports oral histories of her interviewees and identifies the role of literature in language learning. She concluded that extensive reading plays an important role in the improvement of one’s target language. Although the level of interview analysis is not deep enough to examine the impact of reading in Japanese on English proficiency, their method seems to be very meaningful in directing a spotlight on each individual case which does not appear in quantitative data.

3.2 Content Analysis

This method was originally designed in order to analyze the frequency of keywords which appear in newspapers and magazines (Sato, 2017). According to Terashita (2011), its aim is to identify specific attributions of the text objectively. He explains that content analysis can also be used to know what is told in a text such as free descriptive questionnaire, diary, and oral data. As Oppata (2014) shows, the purpose of content analysis is not to generate a theory, but to systematically describe the meanings of qualitative materials. It also enables us to distinguish and illustrate the facts in data. The largest advantage is that it is relatively easy to be applied as an analysis method in the qualitative research.

3.3 Summary: Analytical Framework of the Current Study

The current study aims to closely examine the context of interviews systematically and reveal individual cases which do not come to the surface in the quantitative research alone. That is why this paper utilizes the analytical framework based on content analysis, which is effective to find consistency in data. First, the interviews were transcribed into Japanese (Transcription). The text was divided into segments after seizing the outlines of the interviews (Data Segmentation). Then, the author allocated a code to each concept (Coding). Finally, the codes were categorized into the same themes (Categorization).

4. Results of the Survey

Before the interviews, a survey was conducted to overview how reading in Japanese affects Japanese learners of English. The survey was also used when the author selected interviewees. In this section, I will explain how the survey was conducted and what was found.

4.1 Participants of the Survey

The questionnaire was given to 326 Japanese university students and 10 workers (total 336 people) and it was conducted between January and June in 2018. Among the university students, 246 students majored in humanities, while 80 students were science majors. The questions were prepared referring to other important related studies such as Matsumoto (2016). My questions are

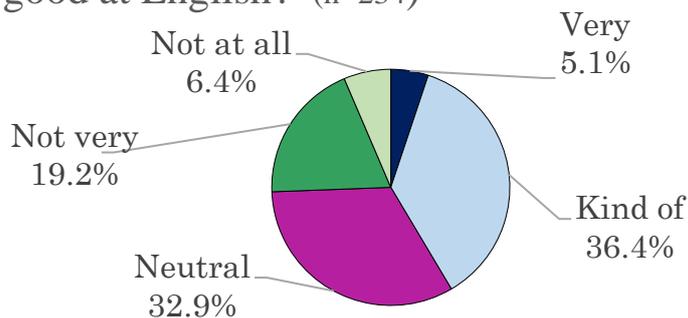
presented below (originally asked in Japanese). Q1: Did you like reading when you were small? If yes, what kind of books did you used to read? Q2: Were you good at Japanese writing when you were in elementary school? Q3: When did you begin to learn English? Q4: Are you currently good at English? If yes, what areas of English are you good at? Q5: How much time are you exposed to English now? Q6: Do you have any English qualifications?

4.2 Results

234 people (69.7%) out of 336 answered that they used to like and enjoy reading in their childhood. Also, the author asked whether the respondents are good at English or not. Out of 234 people who answered that they liked and enjoyed reading when they were small, 97 people (41.5%) said that they are currently good at English. On the other hand, 37 people (36.2%) out of the 102 who were not very positive about reading answered that they are currently good at English. Charts 1 and 2 show details.

Chart 1: Attitude towards English (People Who Liked Reading)

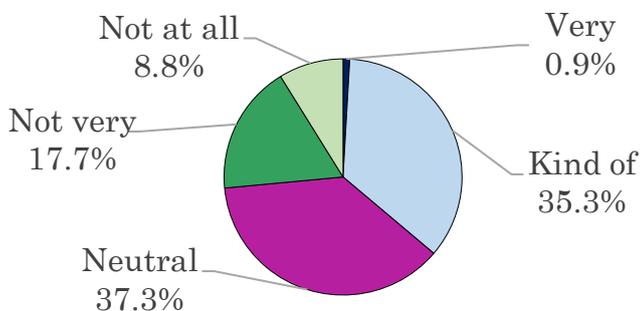
Q: Are you good at English? (n=234)



■ Very (12) ■ Kind of (85) ■ Neutral (77) ■ Not very (45) ■ Not at all (15)

Chart 2: Attitude towards English (People Who did not Like Reading)

Q: Are you good at English? (n=102)



■ Very (1) ■ Kind of (36) ■ Neutral (38) ■ Not very (18) ■ Not at all (9)

4.4 Summary

From the comparison of Charts 1 and 2, it is indicated that people who liked reading in their childhood are more likely to have a positive attitude towards English. It is necessary to mention, however, that the respondents' English level was entirely self-assessed, and that is why the 'neutral' makes a large ratio in both groups. In the current study, the author held interviews with people who showed significant particularity in the questionnaire in order to seek more information about the findings of the survey. I would like to present the details in the next section.

5. Analysis of the Interviews

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. The interviews were conducted in order to investigate how the participants felt about the impact of reading in Japanese on English proficiency and whether reading had really helped their English learning. Through the interviews, the author has reached some major findings. This section explains how the author analyzed the interviews and what was found there.

5.1 Procedure of the Interviews

The interviews were conducted between February and July in 2018. The author chose the semi-structured interview style, in which the order or content of the questions were often changed according to the reaction and interest of the interviewees. Table 1 shows general data of the interviewees.

Table 1: General Data of the Interviewees

	Position	TOEIC Score	Sex	Liked reading in childhood	Good at English
A	Second-year student at a national university	535	M	very much	neutral
B	Second-year student at a national university	545	F	kind of	kind of
C	Second-year student at a national university	550	F	kind of	kind of
D	Second-year student at a national university	660	F	very much	kind of
E	Second-year student at a national university	675	F	very much	kind of
F	Second-year student at a national university	720	M	kind of	kind of
G	Second-year student at a national university	770	M	very much	kind of
H	Second-year student at a public university	650	M	very much	kind of
I	Second-year student at a public university	680	F	very much	kind of
J	Third-year student at a national university	780	F	very much	very
K	Fourth-year student at a public university	865	F	not very much	not very

L	Fourth-year student at a national university	875	M	neither	kind of
M	A certified public accountant	910	M	very much	very
N	A lecturer at a university	—	F	very much	very
O	A lecturer at a university	900	F	very much	kind of
P	A lecturer at a university	990	F	very much	not very
Q	An associate professor at a university	(TOEFL 630)	F	very much	kind of

5.2 The Findings Through the Analysis

As I explained in Section 4, this paper employs the analytical framework which arranges the content analysis method. After the interviews were closely analyzed, some common themes or concepts were found. First, the interviewees, who experienced a lot of reading in their childhood, had a positive attitude towards Japanese class at school. In addition, these interviewees recognized that their Japanese competence had helped English learning. I will show how some interviewees described this below.

5.2.1 Grades in Japanese

14 people out of 17 interviewees answered that they liked Japanese class and got good grades based on their school reports. Many of them also said that they were good at writing in Japanese. I will extract several passages from the interviews (Translated into English by the author).

- *I liked Japanese class and got good grades in elementary and junior high school. I also loved memorizing new Kanji characters. (B)*
- *I had no difficulty writing. I once won the prize in the county book report contest. (E)*
- *I got better grades in Japanese than math, I'm now majoring in engineering, though. (G)*
- *I think I knew how to compose essays which would satisfy adults. When I was in the fifth or sixth grade, I wrote about a successful experience in the high jump. I won a prize in the writing contest and my work appeared in the local newspaper. I feel that not everything in the essay was true, but that was one of the strategies of story-making. (Q)*

These testimonies revealed a clear link between reading and a positive attitude towards Japanese as a school subject. Reading seems to help improve proficiency in writing as well.

5.2.2 Impact of Japanese Competence on English Proficiency

Now, how do the interviewees understand the correlation between their Japanese competence

and English performance skill? I will extract several passages from the interviews, in which the interviewees tell how they feel about it.

- *I think that your knowledge of Japanese is very important regarding how you describe foreign expressions in your mother tongue. (A)*
- *Your vocabulary in Japanese makes a difference when you translate English into Japanese. You can't write good Japanese if you don't know enough words. (C)*
- *I realize that I greatly depended on my Japanese competence in learning English. When I translated English into Japanese, for example, I could use nice Japanese even if I didn't perfectly understand English sentences. It is impossible that you describe something in English that you can't express in Japanese. (D)*

It is implied that many of the interviewees recognize that their Japanese competence may have influenced English proficiency, especially in writing and translation. Consequently, most of them liked English class and did well at school. Moreover, some realize that broad knowledge of vocabulary and expressions in Japanese is also very useful in English composition and/or translation.

5.2.3 Significance of Reading in Japanese

Next, based on the analysis of interview data, I would like to refer to how the interviewees consider the significance of reading in Japanese. The passages from the interviews below show the interviewees' ideas.

- *Even if I don't understand English sentences, I can guess meanings from the context. (E)*
- *I have done a lot of reading and I feel like my Japanese skill of guessing helps when I read English. (I)*
- *If I had not read many books and had not been so interested in Japanese, I think I wouldn't be as into English and careful about meanings of English words as I am now. (J)*
- *In some cases, the meanings totally change with different orders or choices of Japanese words. If you don't notice that, you'll have no sense in English either. (M)*
- *I read rather difficult novels and essays when I was in elementary school, which I think have created my skills of understanding and dealing with English sentences logically. Also, I can guess the meanings of English words that I don't know from the context. (O)*

Extensive reading in Japanese seems to offer a good chance to improve a sense of guessing meanings of unknown words and handle the contexts logically. It is inferred that those participants apply this technique to reading English. Regarding how to acquire a high level of Japanese competence, the following extract from one of the interviews may offer a very significant implication.

▪A solid foundation of Japanese language as a mother tongue enables you to write properly in both Japanese and English. In order to gain a high level of Japanese competence, you need a lot of input, of course, but you also need to write a lot and output all sorts of things. Reading only is probably not enough, I think. (P)

The above mentioned perspective seems meaningful in terms of expanding a viewpoint into writing as an output practice, not only reading itself as a part of input activity. This may be a great inspiration upon a firm grasp of Japanese language.

6. Discussion

In the sections above, how reading in Japanese influences English language competence was described. Major findings can be summarized as follows. First, there should be a clear link between reading experience and grades in Japanese at school. Most of the interviewees gained good grades in Japanese and many of them were good at Japanese composition as well. It is supposed that exposing oneself to literary works may be one of the most significant tips on how to write good Japanese and achieve advanced writing skill. Next, quite a few interviewees recognized that their Japanese competence had played an important role in English learning. They could, for instance, select nice Japanese in translation and they felt that their knowledge in Japanese was very useful in describing something in English. In other words, those participants have applied Japanese competence to English learning. Finally, reading in Japanese seems to help improve English performance skills such as guessing the meanings of new words, understanding the context logically, and choosing appropriate vocabulary and expressions. It is reasonable to say that reading in Japanese offers a good chance to improve linguistic abilities in both Japanese and English. From these results, it is suggested that English education work in close cooperation with education in the Japanese language in order to assist learners in the establishment of high-level English proficiency.

According to the survey results, the number of people who answered ‘neutral’ to the question “Are you good at English?” is relatively large. There may be a variety of reasons for this and one of them might be that the question was subjective and they hesitated to make a positive choice. Moreover, they might believe that people who are ‘good at English’ should be proficient in speaking. In other words, people who can speak English fluently are judged as ‘masters’ of English. As a follow-up investigation, the author asked some of the respondents what they thought ‘English ability’

was. One states that English ability is the skill to generate, send and receive information, while another says that you need to understand colloquial expressions used in daily conversations. Still another respondent says that 'English ability' is the skill to understand, write and speak sophisticated English, which is composed of high-level language performance skill based on the solid foundation of grammar and vocabulary. In this way, most EFL learners in Japan think that a good learner should be able to not only read and write but also speak good English. This idea seems to have affected the answerers' choice in my questionnaire, that is, some of my respondents may have undervalued themselves even though they actually possess a high level of English competence.

7. Conclusion

In this article I have examined how reading in Japanese and English proficiency are related by qualitatively analyzing the results of a survey and interviews with EFL learners. The current study has identified the following significant findings. First, those who read many books in their childhood had a clear positive attitude towards Japanese class at school. Second, it is suggested that their Japanese competence helps them to learn English, when reading and writing. Finally, reading in Japanese offers a good chance to improve language abilities such as guessing meanings and handling the context logically. These skills seem to be useful for language performance in both Japanese and English.

These findings are very significant in terms of clarifying how reading in Japanese strengthens one's mother language performance. As far as the result of the current study is concerned, it seems reasonable that schools and parents secure sufficient time for young children to read both inside and outside school. The current study implies that the core of elementary education should be the development of the mother tongue, since fostering solid language performance in Japanese will eventually lead to successful English education.

While my findings have significant implications, they are based on the learners' oral testimony only and have not yet been validated. In addition, English performance skills are affected by not only their Japanese competence but also other factors such as how they have studied English and how much they are currently involved in it. Further studies, therefore, are necessary in order to support and develop the current study. One such study could be an analysis of English proficiency and performance by EFL learners, which will help us grasp their actual level of English performance and what kind of English they can deal with. Bearing these qualifications in mind, I also hope to extend this research to support the future development of English education.

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