Techniques in L1 Classrooms Improve Practice of Teaching English as L2

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This article describes some techniques used in classes in Japanese as L1 and how they can be effective in classes in English as L2 where they may not be well known. Firstly three techniques used in teaching a poem in Japanese are illustrated. These techniques were applied to two L2 reading classrooms, with the result that intensive reading was facilitated and learners' attitude improved. Next, teacher talk, especially in questions and directions, was examined because of the importance in carrying out a technique of the words actually spoken by teachers. A particular example of teacher talk from a class in L1 social studies was adapted and applied to an L2 reading lesson. Finally, the importance is emphasized of an organization to gather, improve and share teaching techniques.

1. Techniques for Teaching a Poem in L1

Classes in Japanese as L1 have developed effective classroom techniques which are applicable to English teaching but unfamiliar to English teachers. This paper describes some techniques for teaching reading comprehension used by L1 teachers at primary schools and suggests their application to reading exercises in English as L2. The following description of a Japanese lesson, actually given to primary school pupils, suggests principles and practical means for better teaching of reading, both in L1 and L2.

A prominent teacher, Mr. Yoichi Mukoyama, was once observing a teacher reading a Japanese poem with a class of fifth graders. Here is my translation of the poem written by N. Harada.

A grasshopper
A grasshopper was on sale at a little stall at a night fair.
“This is specially cheap because one of its long legs is gone. Won’t you buy it?” said the man at the stall.
I bought it but not because it was cheap.

Coming home, I watched the grasshopper munch on cucumbers; it must have been extremely hungry.
I put it in an insect cage under the eaves.
No matter how long I waited, it did not begin to chirp, until I went to bed. Suddenly I heard its beautiful chirp.

“Yoshio, listen to that.”

Said Mom in a small voice.
I just kept quiet.

The major question of the day’s lesson was on the blank line, the last line intentionally omitted from the original poem. The teacher gave this direction: Guess what words were in the blank line, where the boy’s feeling was expressed. Most of the pupils, however, found it difficult to guess the words, and only a few of them contributed. These ideas were discussed in a rather dull atmosphere, with a few children giving casual opinions to support one of the ideas, while the others remained indifferent.

When the lesson was about to end in confusion, Mr. Mukoyama asked permission to teach for the remaining five minutes. He began by giving the following questions and directions one by one:

[Question and Direction]
Where is the first stanza? Put your fingers on it.
Which are Mother’s words? Put your first fingers on them.

The children quickly began to concentrate on study because of the simple act of moving their fingers. Having checked their correct response, the teacher gave another direction:

[Direction]
Read Mother’s words aloud.

P1: Yoshio, listen to that.


P2: Yoshio, listen to that.

T: Zero. It should be said differently.

Mr. Mukoyama intentionally called on those pupils who had been too eager to answer
or who looked like 'clever' pupils. All of them were given 'zeros' for they said the words in a loud voice. The classroom became silent, all the children thinking how to say the words. Finally a quiet, timid-looking girl was asked. She said in a small voice, "Yoshio, listen to that," followed by "30 marks!" uttered by the teacher. The rest of the pupils were surprised and wondered why her reading was better, when the next direction was given:

[Direction]
Stand up. Practice reading Mother's words. You may sit down as soon as you know how to read them.

When everyone was sitting down, several pupils were called on and they all got '100 marks', since they could read the line in a small, low voice. The final question was asked in the following form:

[Question]
The boy had long been waiting for the insect's chirping. Just when he went to bed, feeling disappointed, it began to chirp.
How did he feel?
A: happy
B: sad

All the pupils immediately chose 'A'. Pressed for time, Mr. Mukoyama did not let the children discuss their choice but said emphatically, 'You really think the boy was happy?' All the faces looked full of confidence. The teacher began to read all the printed part of the poem, until the last line in question was to be read. The pupils leaning forward, the teacher read it: "The chirp sounded sorrowful."

"Really?", "How come?", "Strange!"—reactions and discussions among children continued even during the recess. For further details of the lesson, see Mukoyama (1986). Mr. Mukoyama's teaching included three effective techniques for facilitating reading comprehension; or perhaps more than reading—learning in the classroom in general.

1) To involve all learners.
   This is exemplified by such little directions as "Put your fingers on the line." or "Stand up and read." Through these actions, any pupil becomes aware of and involved in the present task, attempting to have his/her own answer, while the teacher can see how quickly and correctly individual pupils respond.

2) To make a 'Reversal Phenomenon' happen.
   Quick and clever-looking pupils were all given 'zeros' for their oral reading, while a quiet, timid-looking girl got a good mark. This incident functions to show learners that anybody can make mistakes and anybody can answer correctly. Having realized that
'the dull' and 'the sharp' are reversible depending on the given task, pupils overcome their prejudices about their classmates' ability and become ready to respect other's opinions.

The 'Reversal Phenomenon' can be brought about through good preparation of the learning task by the teacher, by using tasks for which the correct response would not always come from 'good' learners, and through his careful observation of individual learners, including reading their facial expressions. 'Oral reading of a character's line' may be used for such a task as to produce the phenomenon in L2 reading classes.

3) To make a problem easy to approach.

'Problem solving' is in itself an excellent teaching-learning device. In the above lesson, filling in the blank line of the poem was given as such an activity, seemingly of great help to understand the theme of the poem. The pupils, however, found it very hard to think of the erased words. Mr. Mukoyama thus made the problem easier: he made a 'binary-choice' question (A or B) in place of the 'free response' writing task. A learning problem should be given in such a form that it can be approached by most, or hopefully all, learners.

2. It Works in English Teaching——Example 1

Two of the above-mentioned techniques were used in my first example of a reading class—a class of reading English as L2 in the general education course at Oita University. The techniques for 'involving all learners' and 'Reversal Phenomenon' did work well, with small modifications made to Mr. Mukoyama's method. Before describing my teaching procedure of the day's lesson, I will give below the summary of the story we had been reading and part of the target text of the day.

[SUMMARY]

Totto-chan, a little girl, had already been expelled although she had only just started primary school. According to the homeroom teacher, Totto-chan disrupted the whole class by various acts of mischief such as inviting 'street musicians' (chindonya) into the classroom in the middle of the class. Mother had been looking for another school, a school where they could understand her little girl. Totto-chan and Mother were on their way to the new school found after a good deal of searching.

(Totto-chan: the little girl at the window. by T. Kuroyanagi, translated by D. Britton, Kodansha International, 1982)

[TARGET TEEXT]

The school they were on their way to was one Mother had found after a good deal of searching.

Mother did not tell Totto-chan she had been expelled. She realized Totto-chan wouldn't
understand what she had done wrong and she didn't want her to get any complexes, so she decided not to tell Totto-chan until she was grown-up. All Mother said was, “How would you like to go to a new school? I've heard of a very nice one.”

“All right,” said Totto-chan, after thinking it over. “But…”

“What is it now?” thought Mother. “Does she realize she's been expelled?”

But a moment later Totto-chan was asking joyfully, “Do you think the street musicians will come to the new school?”

Here is my first direction:

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<td>Draw straight lines under Mothers’ speech.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Draw wavy lines under Totto-chan's speech.</td>
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The simple activity, drawing underlines, involved all the students. Tasks done by individuals let every learner be conscious of the present target of the study. Further, it was supposed that through checking the characters’ words, the students would notice the difference between the words actually said by Mother and the ones occurring in her mind (i.e. “What is it now?” and “Does she realize she's been expelled?”). The underlining activity, therefore, accomplished two purposes: involvement of all learners and facilitation of reading comprehension.

Another direction followed concerning the characters’ speech just elicited by the students. It was given in he hope that a 'Reversal Phenomenon' would happen.

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<th>Direction</th>
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<tr>
<td>Look at the words by Mother and Totto-chan that appear up to the eighth line.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making a pair, practice saying their words well.</td>
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After practice, several students were called on to read aloud:

S1: How would you like to go to a new school? I've heard of a very nice one.

S2: All right. But …


Both students were fluent in their oral reading, but I gave them a ‘zero’, paying special attention to the initial word of Totto-chan’s speech.

Another pair stood up and read, only to get a ‘zero’ followed by the teacher's comment, “even though your pronunciation was very good”. All the students were beginning to be keenly interested in this activity, for the classmates with fluent pronunciation were given the lowest mark one after the other. The fact was that fluent readers did not succeed just because of their fluency, their oral reading at rapid speed with little pause between lines, which they had probably been proud of.

The third pair read the words out, followed by the teacher's loud voice, “20 marks!”
Their reading of Totto-chan’s part went like this:
“(pause for 2 secs.) All right. But . . .”
The students were still uncertain of the point of better reading and a few more pairs kept getting ‘zeros’, some putting a wrong pause between “All right.” and “But . . .”
There are students, usually male students, who get enthusiastic about solving a ‘tricky’ problem of this sort which ‘good’ students have been unable to handle. That day was a chance for such students to come forward. Meeting my expectation, a male student with terrible pronunciation read the line as follows, to be given “90 marks! Super!”:
“(a long pause about 6 secs.) All right. But . . .”
There should be a rather long pause between Mother’s words and Totto-chan’s “All right”, because the girl thought over Mother’s idea for a while before saying it, as the text clearly says:

...... I’ve heard of a very nice one.”

“All right,” said Totto-chan after thinking it over. (underline, mine.)

In the same way as Mr.Mukoyama evaluated the pupil’s oral reading, in expectation for a ‘Reversal Phenomenon’ to come about, I attempted to have the phenomenon happen in my L2 classroom, where a ‘poor’ reader with bad pronunciation was marked higher than ‘good’ readers with great fluency.

To conclude, the two techniques in L1 reading classes—techniques for involving all learners by letting individuals ascertain the character’s lines and for causing a reversal phenomenon by evaluating oral reading, were successfully applied to an L2 reading class, resulting in intensive reading on the part of learners.

3. It Works in English Teaching—Example 2

In the example that follows, the two techniques, ‘facilitating problem-solving’ and again ‘causing a Reversal Phenomenon’ are exemplified in my teaching at a junior high school. Several years ago I visited the school as a ‘guest teacher’ to teach the textbook material *Mujina* to eighth graders. The summary of the popular reading material is presented below, with the day’s target text following it.

[SUMMARY]

Long ago in the city of Edo, there was a lonely slope which people stayed away from after dark. A *Mujina*, they say, lived there. One night, an old man was walking up the slope on his way home, when he saw a girl in a beautiful *kimono* crouching, crying under a tree with her face covered with the long sleeves. The kind old man came up to her to ask what happened to her.
The girl did not say anything. She was crying.

The girl did not answer. Slowly she got up, but she turned her back to the old man.

The second illustration seemed strange to me, because when the man asked the reason for her crying, the girl should be still crouching and facing toward the man; the girl in the illustration has already got up and shown her back to him. It is not my intent to criticize the textbook, for I understand that this sort of 'compression' of pictures would be necessary to illustrate as many incidents of the story as possible in the limited space. That day, however, I drew pupil's attention to the problem of the illustration to have them understand the description of the girl's actions in the text. The major direction for reading comprehension was given in the following words:

Q: There is something wrong in the second picture. Read the text and point it out.

This question is very difficult, probably as difficult as guessing the erased words of the poem discussed earlier. The technique for 'facilitating problem-solving' was thus required to make the problem easy to approach. Though, to motivate their reading of the text, I told the pupils at the beginning of the reading activity that something was wrong with the picture, I avoided discussing it then and instead we started to interpret each sentence. Reading the last line, I gave the following direction:

[Direction]
I, being the old man, will say, "Why are you crying? Can I help you?" Then you,
being the girl, act out what the girl did in the story.

I let them crouch down near the desks and all of them crouched facing the old man, so the action so far was made correctly by the pupils. The pupils, maybe unconsciously, assumed a posture different from the one illustrated in the textbook. After the old man’s words were uttered, they stood up and turned their backs to me, the old man. Their acting was just perfect. Finally, as they went back to their seats, I reminded them of the problem of the illustration and gave them time to think about it. Just as we were about to discuss it, the bell began to ring and the question was left as an assignment for the next class.

The difficult question of pointing out the wrong part of the given picture, was thus made easier for learners to solve, through having them act out the character’s movement themselves. Educational objectives can be successfully reached when learning problems take the form of ‘learnable’ tasks carefully prepared by teachers.

This lesson represents another example of a ‘Reversal Phenomenon’. With great care, I was watching the pupils perform the girl’s role: they began to stand up one after another; a quick learner got up first confidently and two boys did so last in a sluggish way. Smiling at the two boys, I said these words in a loud voice:

T: How wonderful you are! In this class, you have understood the meaning of the phrase, “Slowly she got up,” best of all. Those who stood up quickly are no good. The two boys who would have always been slow in learning and seldom been praised by the teacher, looked vacant at first, and later grinned. It was my intended behavior to praise the pupils who had stood up later than most others, giving a clear reason for their excellence.

4. In Search of Effective Words in Teacher Talk

Teachers, especially language teachers should try to use, in teacher talk, such words as will activate learners’ thought and behavior. Growing interest in teacher talk has encouraged detailed examination of the exact words by teachers and following responses by learners. Interestingly, since the 1980’s both in L2 research overseas and in practice at primary school in Japan, effectiveness in teacher talk has attracted people observing or working in the classroom. This section is devoted to a brief sketch of some principles which primary school teachers have noted through their daily practice.

Although there are good examples of effective talk in classes in Japanese as L1, I should like to first introduce some widely known examples in social studies classes, the examples having inspired a great many studies. Different examples and an application to L2 classrooms will be discussed later.

Compare the following two questions given so as to have learners study the job of bus
drivers:

(1) What is the bus driver's job?
(2) Where does the bus driver look when he is driving the bus?

To the first question, children give the simple but absolutely correct answer, "He drives the bus." Expecting other answers, teachers repeat "Anything else?", usually followed by few or no more responses. To the second question, by contrast, children make quick responses. One says, "He looks in front," and another says, "He looks at the traffic signals." followed by another answer, "He looks at the mirror, too. I was scolded by the driver one day when I was making a fuss on the bus." and so on and so forth. To answer this question means the same as to find the very things a bus driver does. Apparently the second question is far superior to the first.

Here is another example from a social studies class. The question, "Why does a train conductor whistle?" does not work well, but the following question elicits different ideas which lead to a heated discussion:

Q : A train conductor whistles. Whom does he expect to hear his whistle?
A : (e.g) The driver/The passengers

For further discussion of the teacher's questions given above, see Mukoyama (1985) and Arita (1988).

A principle of effective questions can be drawn out of the above examples: Use 'language of perception'. Words concerned with sensation, such as see or hear, when contained in teacher questions, evoke a vivid picture of the learning object and thus facilitate mental activities by learners. Being asked where a bus driver looks, learners quickly begin to think about it, remembering their past experiences of riding on a bus. The question about a train conductor's whistle takes learners to a platform pictured in the mind, and perhaps hearing an imaginary whistle they begin to wonder whom the whistle is given to.

Another principle, slightly different but closely related to the principle suggested above, has been developed by Iwashita (1989) in the form of "Include things evoking clear images". He argues that the following items put into teacher talk activate learning: objects, persons, places, numbers, sounds and colors. Typical examples of teacher talk containing these items are as follows:

[Objects] "Turn your navels to me." (to draw attention to the teacher)

[Persons] "Whom does a train conductor expect to hear the whistle?" (the question already discussed)

[Places] "From where is the narrator watching the butterfly? Draw a picture of the scene in the poem and indicate the narrator's place by drawing an eye on it." (when studying a one-line poem:

A butterfly, all alone, has gone across the Dattan Straits.

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by F. Anzai)

[Numbers] “Remember and write the numbers which have appeared in the story.”
(after letting pupils close their books)

[Sounds] “Can you hear the sound of the falling rain? Let’s listen to it.” (to calm down noisy pupils having gathered in the gym)

[Colors] “What colors have appeared in the story and what represents those colors?”
(to let pupils comprehend the gist of the story)

The two principles suggested by the primary school teachers inspired me to apply them to L2 classrooms. The result seemed a remarkable success.

A question containing the words hear and sounds, examples of ‘language of perception’ and ‘things evoking clear images’, was addressed to first year students at a senior high school during a normal reading lesson. This procedure was carried out by their normal teacher. Both the question and the reading material were printed on a sheet of paper with a printed introduction of the story attached at the top. The introduction was necessary because the material was taken from a book other than their textbooks.

[INTRODUCTION AND QUESTION]
(given all in Japanese)

Laura’s family was moving across the prairie. One day when they were going across a river, their dog named Jack disappeared. The following excerpt describes the family camping that night. Read the English and answer the question.

[Question]
What sounds(oto) do you hear in this scene? Make a list of what you hear.

Under the question was a photocopy of the excerpt together with an illustration. The illustration has been deleted from the following citation:

[TEXT]

The family camped that night. The father made a fire and then brought some water from the river. The mother cooked dinner over the fire, and Laura and Mary helped her. It was a simple dinner, but it was good. They wondered where Jack was. They all missed him.

Soon the prairie became dark and cool. Only the wind moved through the tall grass. The moon and many large stars were seen in the great sky.

[from “A Camp on the High Prairie” in Sunshine English Course 3]

On the next page are several samples of the students’ responses, all of them being photocopied with my English explanation attached to them. As these samples show, the students gave answers in different ways: for instance, some wrote only onomatopoeic words, and others descriptive accounts of what they heard. During the given ten minutes,
[Responses from Tenth Graders]

[Student A: onomatopoeic words]

- Sigh: もう Classification
- Cough: シュ−
- Sneezing: シュ−
- Coughing: シュ−
- Whistling: シュ−
- Grunting: シュ−
- Stomach churn: シュ−
- Heartbeat: シュ−

[Student B: descriptive accounts]

- Sigh: もう
- Cough: シュ−
- Sneezing: シュ−
- Coughing: シュ−
- Whistling: シュ−
- Grunting: シュ−
- Stomach churn: シュ−
- Heartbeat: シュ−

[Student C: onomatopoeias with descriptions]

- Fire: キャッ (キャッ)
- Water: サ− (サ−)
- Snow: サ− (サ−)
- Wind: サ− (サ−)

[Student D: indications of the sources of sounds]

The family moved that night. The father
made a fire and their home was
from the fire. The mother called
over the fire. How! How! Her heart.
It was a simple dinner, but it was good.
They wondered where Jack was. They all
asked him.
Sure the minute became dark and
Only the− through the tall plane.
The moon and many stars were seen
in the great sky.

[Student E: the largest number of sounds given by one person]

- Fire: 3+1 (3-4) (3-4)
- Water: 3 (3)
- Snow: 3 (3)
- Wind: 3 (3)
- Heartbeat: 3 (3)

[Student F: descriptions with pictures]

1. A fire
2. A water
3. A snow
4. A wind
5. A heart
as the English teacher of the school reports, the students were enthusiastic about the activity to 'hear' sounds (including voices and noises) coming from the scene. Thus, to ask 'sounds' facilitated the students' concentration on reading the text.

I wished to see what would happen in my classroom when the same question was given, and decided to address it using the same material to freshmen at a college. The result was that the college students looked greatly interested in the question and that the responses elicited from them were, as I expected, very similar to those from the senior high students. After they had finished listing their sounds, I asked students to tell only one of the sounds he heard, so as to get as many different answers from as many students as possible. Each time one gave an answer, I asked him:

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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where does your sound come from?</td>
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In this way, both the responding student and the others looked again at the text to see where the sounds came in.

I admired any kind of answer, even such answers as 'the hoot of an owl' or 'the chirp of an insect', which did not appear in the text directly. Acceptance of every answer by the teacher led the students to tell whatever sound they imagined they heard, and the subsequent task of finding its source became the very activity of 'reading'.

Although the question worked well in the above example, I do not intend to argue that questions of this type should always be asked in every lesson for every material. The normal type of question, usually made for reading the 'facts' written in the text, is of basic importance and I give fact-questions most of the time in my daily classes. A different type of question—a question for comprehending the text in an 'indirect' manner, however, may be added to our list of reading questions. Depending on the kind of text, 'indirect' questions will serve as an excellent addition to direct questions about 'facts'. 'Language of perception' and 'things evoking clear images' suggested by primary school teachers are useful hints to create such indirect questions.

5. Conclusion

English teachers in Japan have been busy importing and learning new theories developed in foreign countries. Their attitude often results in: 1) never-ending pursuit of new theories for the sake of novelty, without making sufficient verification of existing theories in classrooms and 2) indifference toward theory and practice 'made in Japan'. I have argued in this article that principles and techniques developed by primary school teachers in our country, particularly in L1 teaching, are very suggestive in improving our practice in L2 classrooms.

Specially at the level of techniques, a group of young teachers in Japan has proposed
recently a large number of techniques that really 'work' in classrooms. The group, the leader of which is Mr. Mukoyama, mentioned earlier, started in 1984 an influential activity named 'Educational Standardization Movement' (ESM) so as to 'gather', 'improve' and 'share' techniques for classroom practice. In order to continue the search for 'standardized' techniques, participants in this movement have included in their articles exact words of major teacher talk so that many other teachers can repeat and evaluate the proposed techniques in their own classrooms. Through this activity, a technique can be improved and shared, approaching nearer to a standard. For this purpose, this article has attempted to show clearly major questions and directions by teachers. For further examples of effective teacher talk in L2 classrooms, see our book (Yanai et al.: 1988), where the products of the movement are applied to English teaching.

REFERENCES

(all the books below are written in Japanese and published by Meijitosho)
Iwashita, O.(1989) Say 'B', when You Want Children to Do 'A'.

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