

# Redefining and Developing Strategic Reading in University English Education

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## 1. Context & Introduction

Like the country as a whole, education in Japan since the 1980s has experienced significant changes at all levels. Recent years have seen rising public concern in news reports about the academic ability of Japanese students, with rather wide agreement among the media, politicians, educators and other experts that there has been a decline in overall academic skills among the country's young. It is not surprising then that recently elected Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has made education reform one of his key policy goals, with the first meeting of his Education Rebuilding Council held less than three weeks after his taking office and his government's plans to conduct nationwide achievement tests for all of the country's sixth grade and third-year junior high school students beginning in 2007 (Nakamura, 2006).

Beliefs in the decline in academic ability are both anecdotal and based on test score data (e.g., Izukura, 2001; Kariya, 1997; Ono, 2005; Suzuki, Arai, & Yanai, 1999; Tose & Nishimura, 2001). The decline in tests scores has been largely blamed on the Ministry of Education's efforts to reduce the negative consequences of academic pressure in schools by instituting an approach referred to as *yutori kyōiku* ("relaxed education") as recommended by the education council during the mid- to late 1990s. This led to a 30% reduction in academic study time in elementary schools in 2002 in favor of integrated and experiential learning (Arita, 2002). Another culprit that has been identified has been decreasing competition in non-elite university admissions as a result of the steadily declining birthrate since the 1960s and resulting decline in the college-aged cohort group. For many, beliefs in the decline of academic ability were most strongly confirmed in 2004 when Japanese students' achievement scores trended lower than in previous years and lower than students from several other countries in an international comparison.

In terms of educational impact, the meaning and seriousness of declining test scores in basic academic skills can be debated. For example, in a recent survey conducted by the University of Tokyo Center for Research of Core Academic Competences, 53% of public

elementary and junior high school principals and vice-principals indicated that they thought academic performance was the “same” or “improved” from 20 years ago, with only a (albeit large) minority of 47% saying it has “declined” (“Schools finding it hard to keep up with reforms,” 2006). Whether testing instruments reflect past, rather than current, educational goals is also a legitimate question. On the other hand, the increasing level of student selection of examination subjects taken for university entrance has likely meant that study in high school has become much more limited in breadth and that the knowledge and skills of incoming university students have similarly narrowed.

Potential social and individual economic impacts are perhaps clearer. Universities in Japan are stratified in terms of academic reputation and white-collar employment and personal economic gain remain substantially dependent on the name of the university one attends, and admissions into universities are largely dependent on norm-referenced performance on entrance examinations. Thus, it is strongly felt, particularly by parents, that children’s chances of admissions to more elite universities are put in jeopardy with the current “relaxed education” approach introduced by the Ministry of Education and that only students whose families can afford to pay for cram schools and tutors will be able to successfully compete.

Turning specifically to English, which is a compulsory subject throughout the full six years of secondary education, it is clear that student abilities in the language have been declining *as they have traditionally been defined* (largely knowledge of vocabulary and understanding of grammar). For example, using the STEP (*Eiken*) Test as a point of reference, the National Institute for Media Education (NIME) has released data from an ongoing research project which show that on average it now takes until the end of the second year of high school for students to acquire the same level of vocabulary and grammatical competence that in the past was acquired by the end of junior high school (Ono, 2005). As another example, a Ministry of Education, Sports, Science, and Technology-designated research school that focuses especially on developing expressive skills in their English education program reported lower vocabulary and reading (but higher listening and writing) scores on standardized tests taken by its students for the purpose of program evaluation (Shimane Kenritsu Gôtsu Kôtô Gakkô, 2005).

In addition to the usual suspects such as *yutori kyôiku* and less competitive university admissions at non-elite institutions, declining scores can thus likely be attributed to a shift in focus in the school English curriculum and teaching methods. Since the 1980s there has been an increasing emphasis on aural/oral language at the expense (perhaps necessary) of other knowledge and skill areas as a result of various pressures.

This curricular shift as a likely influence on declining tests scores cannot be overlooked. It is likely that time spent trying to develop aural/oral communicative skills has come at the expense of knowledge of vocabulary and grammar and proficiency in other skill areas, particularly reading, all of which figure prominently in most standardized proficiency tests. Whether this is an undesirable result or not can, again, be debated. The current Ministry approach, which includes the likelihood of English being introduced as a formal subject of

study in the elementary school curriculum sometime in the not-too-distant future and continued emphasis on aural/oral skills, appears similar to how mathematics (another basic academic subject) are frequently viewed today. That is, it will be expected that basic operational skills (such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division) will be sufficiently learned by most learners while increasingly difficult ones will, although taught to all, be mastered by relatively fewer numbers at higher levels in the education system based on aptitude, interest, and personal choices in courses in life.

What is probable is that the English reading skills of incoming university students has been and will continue to be much less developed than in the past. Unfortunately, developing knowledge of vocabulary and grammar and, as a result, reading skills, at the university level may have also fallen out of favor with the rejection of past approaches and embrace of oral skills-focused communicative language teaching. This is precisely at a time when greater attention to these is most needed due to their lesser emphasis at lower levels in the education system. English of course is largely a compulsory subject for at least the first two years of undergraduate study. An argument could be made that students largely prefer classes in which aural/oral skills are focused on and practiced and that the university curriculum should cater to this by treating English purely as an enrichment subject. This ignores however that many (if not most) students outside of English majors are largely instrumentally motivated to study the language for future employment, although the ramifications of this are likely only vaguely understood by students themselves.

I do not intend to argue that aural/oral skills (Cummins' BICS, 1981a; 1981b) learned in junior high and high school should not continue to be further practiced and expanded on in university education. However, they should be given lesser attention—relative to other skills and linguistic knowledge—due to a number of reasons. First is their greater emphasis earlier in the education system at the expense of other knowledge and skills, particularly lexicogrammatical and reading. It would thus make sense that the latter receive greater focus in higher education. Secondly, while international face to face and oral communication has become much more routine compared to the past, for most employment-related purposes the need for consuming (and producing) written texts will likely continue to be the most important activity; Thirdly, despite increasing access to audiovisual materials in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, written texts are still likely to serve as more accessible and more plentiful sources of language input for most learners.

## **2. Developing Reading Skills**

The various approaches to teaching reading and employing written texts in English language classes, both historically and in terms of contemporary practice, is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we can very broadly distinguish between two kinds of focuses: (1) reading for the purpose of language learning and (2) reading to develop reading skills. Both can take various forms. For example, traditionally speaking, grammar-translation approaches emphasize local (word and sentence-level) understanding of English or other target language.

When it is the sole focus in the language classroom it is done at the expense of fluency, global-level understanding, and functional language use. Another approach often encountered in commercial textbooks is for reading passages to be followed by mostly literal “comprehension” questions which are meant to have the reader focus on particular vocabulary items, expressions, or grammar, in addition to often having straight vocabulary/expression exercises. In general, the reading-to-learn-the-language approaches tend to use passages that are short and topics that are relatively uncomplicated (or rather, very gradually increasing in complexity).

As examples of skill development approaches, there are skills- and strategies-based instruction, as well as more recently, extensive reading ones. The purpose of these, in contrast to language learning focused reading, is to help learners work towards developing fluency in reading for meaning.

Skills- and strategies-based instruction have held much influence in teaching reading during the last twenty years or so, first in English as a second language (ESL) contexts and later in EFL ones as well (the latter undoubtedly due to the former). Research on reading skills and strategies began in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the fields of psycholinguistics, applied linguistics, and education. They first focused on theoretical accounts of reading and descriptive studies of what skilled second language readers did when engaged in reading in a second language. Researchers began to enumerate various strategies that skilled readers employ such as skimming, scanning, vocabulary guessing, summarizing, etc., and later, educators took to trying to directly teach those same skills to learners of lower proficiency (Carrell, Gajdusek & Wise, 1998; Eskey, 1986). Subsequent descriptive research in general language strategy use found that lower proficiency learners did already use many of the same strategies as higher proficiency ones and that they differed largely only in terms their success in use (Anderson, 1991; Murayama, 1995). As a result (or perhaps in spite of) this, skills and strategies-based approaches became increasingly popular, with instructors searching for ways to teach learners how to successfully use strategies.

Results from experimental studies have been largely mixed, however (White, 2004). In addition, some researchers, suggesting that there is likely a minimum threshold of basic vocabulary, grammar, and low-level reading skills that must be reached before learners are able to read for meaning fluently using strategies, have asserted that skills-instruction is not particularly effective (Akamatsu, 2001). From a different perspective, skills and strategy instruction can be criticized for not being particularly meaningful since they tend to be rather rote and practice with only brief reading passages rather than more authentic ones. That is, learners spend very little time actually practicing reading and more time simply practicing pre-set strategies (White, 2004). This has been the impetus for introducing extensive reading activities into English language classes.

Extensive reading approaches, of course, have their own advantages and disadvantages. One advantage, as just noted, is that students actually engage in practicing reading for meaning and as a result are more likely to develop this skill. In addition, learners will either learn to

transfer those strategies that they engage in when reading in their first language, or develop their own strategies as they read in a second language. However, this assumes that learners already have a basic command of English vocabulary and grammar. For students of relatively higher proficiency levels who do have this, extensive reading allows them to move beyond simple language learning to language use activities. As we have already seen however, many newly admitted university students at relatively lower proficiency likely lack basic lexicogrammatical knowledge and skills (Ono, 2005) to be able to do this with authentic texts (use of basal materials may mitigate, however).

Of course, although I have distinguished between reading for language learning and reading for skill development in terms of teaching focus, the two are not mutually exclusive and can be combined. It is important to realize that currently both are necessary in non-elite university reading instruction. This is clear based not only on data such as that provided by the National Institute for Media Education reported by Ono (2005), but also in data provided by students at the University of Shimane, which has tended to match results obtained in other research.

### 3. University of Shimane Data

The tables (Tables 1-2) and figures (Figures 1-2) below are based on data provided by University of Shimane first year English students in two different years (2002 and 2005) and proficiency levels (intermediate and “false beginner”). Tabular statistics show the results of linear regression analyses of students’ self-reported reading strategy use (obtained by means of a questionnaire developed by Ono, Midorikawa & Robson, 2001) on various dependent variable scores as designed and first investigated by White (2004).

Based on data collected in 2002 from learners of intermediate proficiency (that is, relative to the cohort of incoming students to the University of Shimane) regarding their self-reported reading strategy use, learners that reported higher use of vocabulary and grammar strategies that relied on linguistic knowledge (VGA factor score) tended to show higher levels of reading comprehension as measured on a multiple-choice task test ( $B = .09$ ,  $t(54)=2.67$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $r^2 = .12$  for total test score;  $B = .19$ ,  $t(54)=2.77$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $r^2 = .13$  for main idea items sub-score; Table 1 and Figure 1). Conversely, use of top-down strategies (TDS factor score) were found to have no relationship with higher reading test scores (Table 1). In some instances, negative correlations were obtained. That is, students reporting higher use of some types of strategies (TXV, or “paying attention to text variety” and TXC, “making use of textual clues”) tended to have lower scores on the dependent variables, with significant statistics of  $B = -.15$ ,  $t(54) = -2.19$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $r^2 = .04$  for “textual clue” strategy use on multiple-choice inference item sub-scores (Table 1; perhaps not surprising since learners will rely more on such strategies to extract meaning from texts the lower their proficiency).

Table 1 Summary of Linear Regression Analysis for Reading Strategy Factors on Written Recall (WR) and Multiple-choice (MC) Task Scores for 2002 First-year Students

Factor	DV	B	SE B	$\beta$	t	p	r <sup>2</sup>
TDS	WR Total	.01	.03	.03	.23	.82	.00
	MC Total	.02	.05	.06	.46	.65	.06
TRA	WR Total	.03	.03	.16	1.19	.24	.03
	MC Total	.07	.04	.21	1.53	.12	.05
	MC Details	.17	.09	.27	2.01	.05*	.07
VGA	WR Total	.01	.02	.06	.42	.68	.00
	MC Total	.10	.04	.34	2.67	.01**	.12
	MC Main Ideas	.19	.07	.36	2.77	.01**	.13
RHD	WR Total	.00	.02	-.02	-.14	.89	.00
	MC Total	.04	.04	.16	1.17	.25	.03
	MC Vocabulary	.11	.05	.31	2.33	.02*	.09
TXV	WR Total	.00	.02	.02	.12	.90	.00
	MC Total	-.05	.03	-.20	-1.51	.14	.04
TXC	WR Total	-.01	.02	-.08	-.57	.57	.01
	MC Total	-.05	.03	-.20	-1.52	.14	.04
	MC Inference	-.15	.07	-.29	-2.19	.03*	.04

Notes: N=55. TDS=Top-down strategies; TRA=Translation strategies; VGA=Vocabulary & grammatical analysis strategies; RHD=Rhetorical devices strategies; TXV=Text variety strategies; TXC=Textual clues strategies.

\*p<.05. \*\*p<.01.

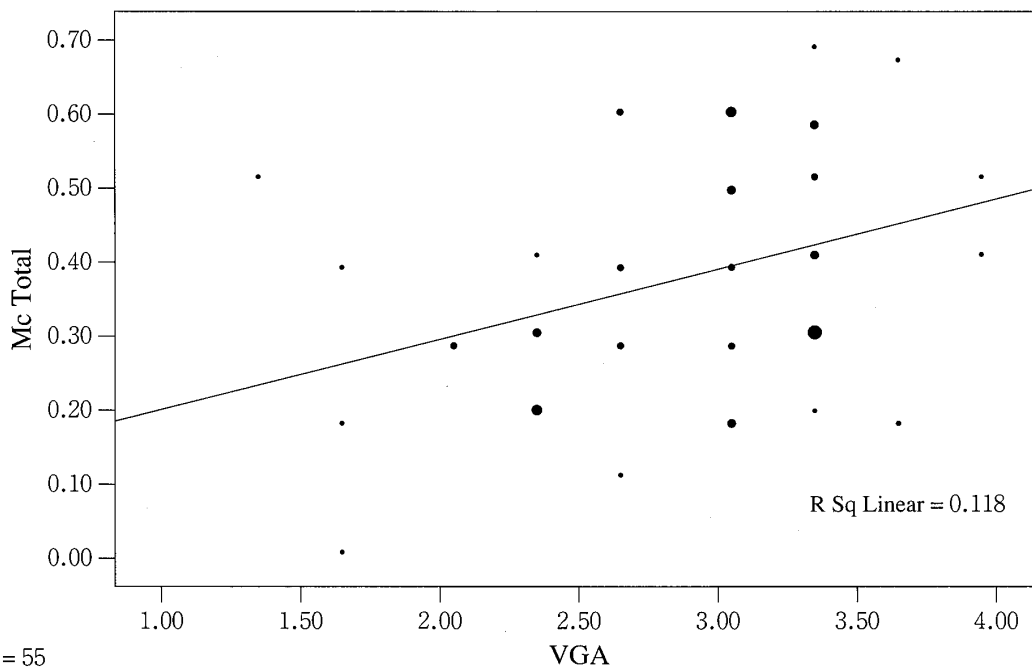


Figure 1 Scatterplot of Vocabulary & Grammatical Analysis Factor (VGA) Scores with Multiple-choice(MC Total) Scores

With a sample of “false beginner” students of relatively lower proficiency providing data in 2005, higher use of top-down and other strategies was overwhelmingly negatively correlated with comprehension on the majority of dependent measures, which included a class placement test in addition to multiple-choice task test similar to the 2002 sample above (Table 2; Figure 2). In other words, the higher the reported strategy use, the lower the score was on a dependent measure. Most illustrative of this are the statistics for the TDS factor on class placement test scores,  $B = -.21$ ,  $t(46) = -2.99$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $r^2 = .19$ .

It must be noted that the correlation coefficients for the score data introduced above and in Tables 1 and 2 are for the most part only slight to moderate in size, with effects sizes ranging from approximately 5% to 19% of the variances. In addition, they are largely limited to multiple-choice dependent measures (multiple-choice task test and placement test), as no significant correlations were found between any strategy use and a written recall task conducted with the 2002 sample of students. However, the results presented here do suggest a negative trend in the case of top-down and similar strategy use and test scores, particularly at lower proficiency levels, and an opposite positive trend with regard to the use of so-called bottom-up, or linguistically-focused strategies. Whether these trends would appear more pronounced with more sensitive instruments remains a question for future research, as does the nature of the relationship between strategy use and reading comprehension/test performance. It should be noted, however, that results here are consistent with findings obtained by other researchers (e.g., Purpura, 1997; Ono, Midorikawa & Robson, 2001).

Table 2 *Summary of Linear Regression Analysis for Reading Strategy Factors on English Class Placement Test (Placement) and Multiple-choice (MC) Task Scores for 2005 First-year Students*

Factor	DV	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	$r^2$
TDS	Placement	-.21	.70	-.43	-2.99	.01**	.19
	MC Total	-.02	.03	-.10	-.61	.55	.01
	MC Vocabulary	-.11	.05	-.30	-1.99	.05*	.09
TRA	Placement	-.91	.65	-.21	-1.39	.17	.05
	MC Total	-.05	.03	-.27	-1.77	.08	.07
	MC Main Ideas	-.13	.07	-.30	-1.98	.05*	.09
TXV	Placement	-.79	.58	-.21	-1.37	.18	.05
	MC Total	-.02	.03	-.10	-.67	.51	.01
	MC Vocabulary	-.09	.04	-.32	-2.17	.04*	.10
TXC	Placement	-.77	.53	-.22	-1.44	.16	.05
	MC Total	.00	.02	.02	.13	.89	.00

Notes: N=47. TDS=Top-down strategies; TRA=Translation strategies; TXV=Text variety strategies; TXC=Textual clues strategies.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

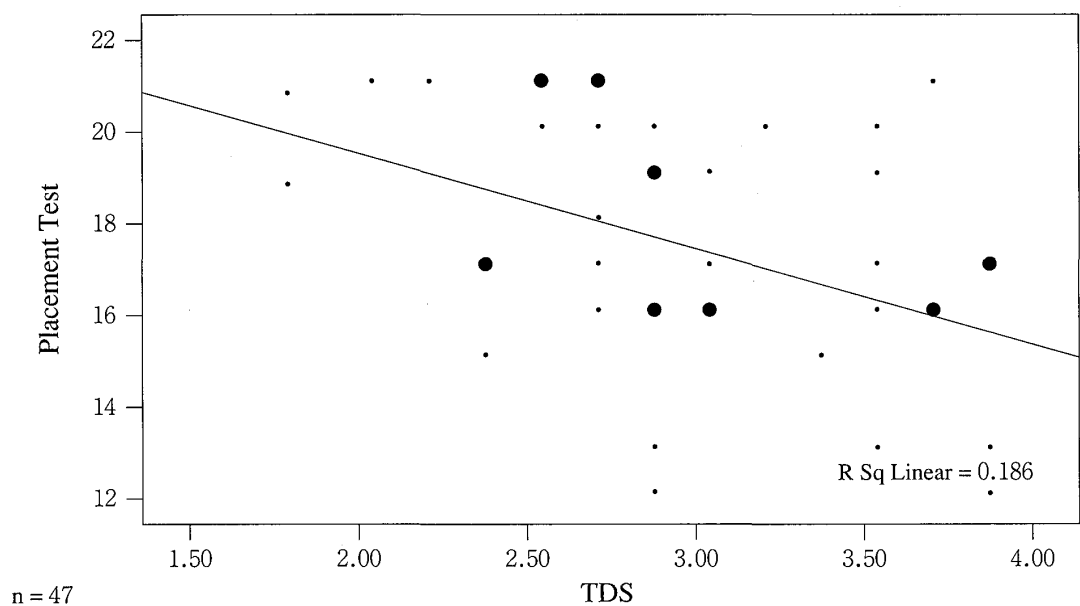


Figure 2 Scatterplot of Top-down Reading Strategies (TDS) Factor Scores with Class Placement Test scores

#### 4. Discussion & Conclusion

Both the preceding discussion of declining academic and English language achievement, as traditionally measured, and the University of Shimane student data just presented suggest that a greater emphasis should be placed on improving student lexicogrammatical knowledge and skills in university language and reading instruction. Put differently, developing strategic reading must include a greater focus on bottom-up knowledge and skills—most likely more so than standard skills and strategy-based instruction attempt to achieve. Rather than spending a large amount of class time on strategy training, as is the case with many texts and classrooms, time may be better spent focusing on linguistic knowledge and skills development since one-off treatments of limited vocabulary or grammar points are not likely to be effective. Appropriate extensive reading exercises completed outside of class will likely allow students to develop their own skills and strategies (ideally, extensive reading assignments would themselves include some kind of language focus as well). This does not mean that specific skills and strategies should not be introduced in class, but should be done on a more targeted and limited basis. At lower proficiency levels, remedial-type work that emphasizes basic grammar and vocabulary will likely be of greatest benefit. And if, as Yamada (e.g., 2005; 2006) has continuously pointed out, English language education in Japan has failed to adequately or appropriately address culture in teaching grammar and vocabulary—something that will likely continue with the introduction of English as an elementary school subject and the lack of training among school homeroom teachers—then the need to address it in building up lexicogrammatical knowledge as both a part of and complement to developing strategic reading skills at the university level becomes equally clear.

There is a tendency in applied fields for the pendulum to swing back and forth due to



prevailing trends and as counter-reactions to these, as is clear in the history of English education in Japan (viz. Imura, 2003). For a variety of reasons—namely “relaxed education,” less competitive university admissions, and curricular shifts—today’s entering university students, while more accustomed to the spoken language (and this is a good thing), are perhaps on average, less better prepared in terms of other areas of language, specifically knowledge of vocabulary and grammar and skills in reading if traditional measures are taken as legitimate ones. As a result, teaching strategic reading must also evolve to include a focus on these. That the university English curriculum should adapt to meet current realities is natural, and such changes will in turn likely influence future evolution of the school curriculum.

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**Key words:** English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading  
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declining academic skills

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