

The role of reading in a Japanese language program: A response to the MLA Ad Hoc Committee's Report (2007)

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I am currently Senior Lecturer and Coordinator of the Japanese Language Program in the Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages and Literatures at Washington University in St. Louis. My response to the MLA Report on “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World” relates exclusively to the role of reading Japanese (although similar issues presumably apply to the teaching of other Asian languages) and is based predominantly on my experience as language instructor and program coordinator. I have occupied the latter position for the past twelve years. With the support and expertise of my colleagues in Japanese language and literature, I have designed an integrated curriculum that produces life-long learners who, after four years of undergraduate study, possess the linguistic, communicative, and cultural competence to express themselves in a culturally coherent and appropriate manner when interacting with educated native speakers of Japanese.

The chief programmatic goal is for our learners to be able to interact with Japanese natives, using all four language skills, in ways that are culturally acceptable and situationally appropriate. In the area of reading, our curriculum is designed so that after four years of study learners can comprehend and appreciate authentic texts of diverse types and genres. They are expected to achieve the ability to read with ease and confidence.

We define reading as a socio-cultural act (Nara & Noda, 2003) negotiated between text and reader, and we consider the act of reading to be a cognitive process that involves knowledge not only of symbols/letters, vocabulary and structure but also of culture. In other words, in order to understand the intentions of the author and to formulate meaning, the second language (L2) reader should have a deep knowledge of, and familiarity with, the society and culture in which the given text was produced. Reading instruction in our Japanese language program, from beginning through advanced levels, aims to develop knowledge of the linguistic system and orthography of Japanese while broadening learners' cultural competence so that they can situate the given text in its cultural setting and process for meaning in a way that approaches native-speaker competence. In many ways, the recommendations of the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages have already been implemented in the Japanese language program here at Washington University in St. Louis, and the stipulated transformations have indeed occurred.

Reading the MLA report, I could not help but agree with the committee's many recommendations for moving foreign language departments away from the prevailing two-tiered language-and-literature model and in a direction that reflects: (a) ever-changing geopolitical

realities; (b) the needs and aspirations of foreign language learners in the early 21st Century; and (c) collegiate hiring patterns. Foreign language departments can no longer afford to offer a curriculum that targets only a small minority of its student population, nor can they exclude foreign language instructors, most of whom are contingent faculty, from curricular and departmental governance. The transformations called for in the report are much needed and long overdue. It is critical for institutions to reflect on their current practices and departmental configurations and to implement those curricular and personnel changes that make most sense in light of prevailing circumstances.

This brings me to the specific case of Japanese. What is the role of reading in a reconfigured, transformed foreign language department where the curricular end-goal is not to produce a small cohort of students who will go on to study literature in graduate school (as was the case when I studied Japanese), but rather “educated speakers [and readers] who have deep translingual and transcultural competence” (MLA Ad Hoc Committee, p. 3)?

First, my sense is that the report speaks more to the curricular model that prevails in departments of Western languages and literatures, and less to the current model in non-Western, and, more specifically, Japanese programs. The model of a two- or three-year language sequence that “feeds into a set of core courses primarily focused on canonical literature” (MLA Ad Hoc Committee, p. 2) was closer to the norm in Japanese programs twenty-five years ago, but it has long since changed. As Japanese enrollments soared in the mid-eighties thanks to an expansive Japanese economy, and as foreign-language pedagogy shifted to a communicative approach that values cultural competence and authenticity, reading materials in the third- and fourth-year courses were no longer limited to short stories by canonical writers as they had been in the past; rather, “authentic” texts of varied content, genre, and medium began to be incorporated into the upper-level courses.

But rising enrollments and concomitant changes in the student cohort (students increasingly spanned the disciplinary spectrum and were generally more career-minded; fewer and fewer were chiefly drawn to literary study) and the use of a more communicative approach were not the only reasons for the shift away from literature in the upper-level courses. The new paradigm also reflected the unique challenge presented by Japanese orthography, which includes two syllabaries (*hiragana* and *katakana*; referred to as the *kana* syllabaries) and some two thousand Chinese characters (*kanji*). The implications for reading pedagogy are all but self-evident. Unlike French and Spanish, where the orthographic system is familiar and recognizable to the learner, it takes long years of study for learners of Japanese to reach the point where the writing system itself is no longer an obstacle to comprehension. Consider the fact that it takes the native speaker fully twelve years, from the first year of elementary school until high school graduation, to master the officially-designated 1,945 *jooyoo kanji*, or characters for ordinary use, in all of their various combinations. I should note that *kanji* are not learned as discrete, unitary items; rather, they vary in both meaning and pronunciation (each has from two to four *or more* different pronunciations), depending on how they combine with other *kanji* and the surrounding context. Young native speakers, of course, have the advantage of already knowing the spoken language and cultural code when they are learning the writing system.

In contrast, university programs have only four academic years and on average a mere five

classroom hours a week to teach both the written language and, more importantly, the spoken language. Assuming thirty weeks of instruction per academic year and an average of five hours of class per week, Japanese instructors have a budget of some six hundred contact hours over a four-year period. This is hardly enough time to learn how to use and process nearly two thousand characters—a most daunting task in and of itself, and one that takes the native speaker over a decade to accomplish!

It is clear that Japanese instructors are working under severe time constraints and less than optimal conditions for teaching students how to read. It is no wonder that instructors of Japanese wrestle with fundamental issues when it comes to teaching reading: Which *kana* syllabary—*katakana* or *hiragana*—should be taught first? How many *kanji* should be introduced each year? Which ones? How much time should be spent on reading and writing vs. speaking and listening each year? Should reading and writing be taught separately from speaking and listening?

Answers to these questions will depend on the particular program and its pedagogical goals. Variables such as the caliber of the students, available class time, strategies of pacing, the student/faculty ratio, the type of program—these and other factors need to be considered, and they obviously affect the design of course materials. But the end goal must be kept in mind. How are we to produce learners who can fluently comprehend a range of texts written for native speakers, within the framework of a four-year curriculum? What are reachable goals after one year, two years, three years of college-level instruction? What materials can we realistically expect learners to handle after only two years of Japanese? It is not simply the number of *kanji* that comes into play here. Rather, it is what the learner can **do** with the accumulated *kanji*. Given limited knowledge of a certain subset of *kanji*, what can she or he read? This is the key concern.

When selecting reading material, instructors need to make hard choices. For all the reasons cited above and in the MLA report, it seems clear that the sole emphasis on reading Japanese literature in the upper-level courses is a losing strategy for most students and programs nowadays. This is not to say, however, that students should not be exposed to literature at all. Literary texts can certainly be included in the upper-level courses, but this needs to be done judiciously. Reading literature is demanding and challenging for beginning and intermediate learners of Japanese alike, because it not only requires knowledge of many *kanji* and a large vocabulary but also involves an appreciation for rhetorical style, figuration, narrative voice, and the cultural competence to make informed and sensitive interpretations. Such skills are not typically taught in the first two years of Japanese and are best reserved for the advanced courses, and, I might add, for the literature faculty. When students do read literary texts in the upper-level courses, literature specialists should be encouraged to lead the discussion and/or team-teach with the language instructor.

Designing a four-year curriculum whose goal is for Japanese language learners to read with something approaching native fluency—which is to say, with automaticity and cultural competence—is no easy task. It makes sense to start with simple texts whose chief purpose is to provide information, before moving on to more complex texts requiring interpretive skills, extensive *kanji* facility, and broad cultural knowledge. None of this comes about overnight. Learners, from day one of the first-year course, practice participating in Japanese social contexts in the persona of a native speaker, using the spoken language as a way to play the game, so to speak, of being Japanese. Likewise, even when reading simple texts for information at the

beginning levels, learners need to engage with the text in a way similar to that of a native speaker, by asking themselves, for example: What is this text for? Where would it appear? What does the writer want to convey? What should I do after I read it? Does it require a written response? In other words, cultural competence is not a fifth skill to be learned separately from the other four skills. Here I am drawing a distinction with the way “culture” is defined in the MLA report:

Culture is represented not only in events, texts, buildings, artworks, cuisines, and many other artifacts but also in language itself. Expressions such as “pursuit of happiness,” “liberté, égalité, fraternité,” and “la Raza” connote cultural dimensions that extend well beyond their immediate translation. (p. 2)

Artifacts are produced by a culture, and expressions such as those cited above refer to worldviews or “dimensions” that are indeed culturally specific. Knowing about events, texts, buildings, and so forth is useful background information, and such knowledge may help learners make culturally-informed interpretations. But knowledge alone does not necessarily produce a learner who can read between the lines, who can interpret meaning and intention expressed in a text in a culturally-informed way. If we say that reading is a socio-cultural act and that the text itself is a cultural artifact, then it follows that the role of reading in a program, like the roles of speaking, listening, and writing, should be to improve learners’ ability to participate in the culture and to behave effectively and appropriately, according to the rules of the target culture’s “game.”

How, then, do we tackle reading in Japanese, and what place does it occupy in our overall curriculum? The amount of class time that can be spent on reading gradually increases as learners become more advanced in the spoken language and gain knowledge of *kanji*. We introduce the *katakana* syllabary first (many programs start from day one with *hiragana*) and begin to read simple texts in the fourth week of the first semester, only **after** students have attained a solid foundation in the Japanese sound system and some vocabulary knowledge. In alphabetic languages, such a conspicuous lag between the introduction of spoken and written language is not necessary since learners are already familiar with the writing system.

At every level, reading materials are selected with due concern for the learners’ level of linguistic and cultural knowledge. In the first-year course, simple lists, menus, forms, short emails and letters, ads, and memos that incorporate learned vocabulary, *kana* and *kanji*, are used for skimming, scanning and extensive reading exercises. Here, the primary purpose of reading is to access information. To the extent possible, realistic texts written by native speakers and intended for native readers are used. Only one hour of class out of seven weekly contact hours is devoted to reading. In the second-year course, texts are longer and include all of the above plus short essays. In order to build automaticity and to discourage students from decoding (“mechanical” translation into English), students are given reading materials that contain, for the most part, vocabulary and structures acquired in the first two years of language study. Two of the seven class hours a week are devoted to reading. In third-year Japanese, texts that contain some unlearned vocabulary and that entail more interpretive skills are incorporated.

Many of our majors study abroad in Japan for the third year of language study, where the bulk of class time is spent on text-based activities (reading and discussion). These students return to

campus and typically place into our fourth- or fifth-year course. In the fourth year, as *kanji* and structural knowledge has increased, reading materials include newspaper articles, editorials, journal articles, short stories, blogs, and poetry. At this level, students have acquired sufficient linguistic skills and cultural competence to read, interpret, and discuss a wide range of texts. Substantial class time is devoted to discussion and oral presentation of readings on diverse topics selected by the instructor or the individual student. In the fifth-year course—with enrollments of roughly five or six students per year—the instructor typically consults with students in selecting reading materials that reflect individual interests and needs. Class time is equally divided into individualized sessions and group sessions centered upon the readings. Learners are naturally drawn to texts in their own sub-fields—be it law, business, society, pop culture, literature, and so forth—and efforts are made to have Japanese-speaking specialists on campus join the class discussion and/ or serve as resources on project work.

Finally, the role of reading in any collegiate foreign language program should be to advance learners' overall linguistic competence and to deepen cultural knowledge, so that they might ultimately be able to function as normal members of the target society. In the case of Japanese, the road to linguistic and cultural literacy is indeed long and arduous, but with the benefit of a carefully-planned reading curriculum, learners can make tremendous progress in the span of four years and be well on their way toward becoming “educated speakers who have translingual and transcultural competence” (MLA Ad Hoc Committee, p. 3).

References

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