Assessment of the Effectiveness of Translanguaging Pedagogy for Japanese EFL Students' reading Comprehension

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Abstract

New EFL policy introduced in Japan in 2020 made English the only language of instruction. However, a survey showed that both EFL teachers and learners favor the use of the L1 in EFL classes. Furthermore, research conducted outside Japan found that translanguaging pedagogy helps learners better develop their English competency compared to instructions that encourage using only the target language. Translanguaging pedagogy urges L2 learners to use all languages in their linguistic repertoire. This paper presents a proposal to evaluate the effectiveness of translanguaging pedagogy in developing the reading comprehension ability of a group of Japanese EFL learners. It suggests a pre-test and post-test assessment of the reading comprehension of an experimental and a control group of Japanese EFL learners. Both groups will take part in reading comprehension improvement classes; the experimental group will receive instruction based on translanguaging pedagogy, and the control group will be restricted to using only English in their classes.

1. Introduction

Most Japanese people get six years of training in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) by the time they graduate from high school, and at least 8 years after college (Thompson, 2001). Yet, most Japanese have relatively low English skills; they are not able to sustain extended conversations in English, and struggle with listening and reading (Egitim, 2020; Kumagai, 1994; Steele and Zhang, 2017). This is shown by their relatively low performance in standardized English proficiency tests such as the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) (Yokogawa, 2017). It is because from middle school, Japanese EFL learners are trained to internalize long lists of vocabulary relying on rote learning and memorization. Additionally, reading comprehension classes tend to be grammar-translation classes (Egitim, 2020; Kumagai, 1994; Steele and Zhang, 2017).

With a shrinking population and domestic market, Japanese businesses are striving to expand overseas, but such expansion is often hindered by the lack of Japanese workers with reliable foreign language competencies. To cope with this shortage, leading corporations such as Honda, Nissan, and Rakuten have made English the company language (Takino, 2019; Tsedal, 2019). They are also using employees' performance at the TOEIC for job placement and career advancement (Takahashi, 2012; Tsedal, 2019). Furthermore, they have actively lobbied for the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) and educational institutions to play an active role in "fostering personnel who can use English in their work" (Takahashi, 2012).

In response to businesses' demands, more than 245 colleges and universities have introduced TOEIC courses to equip students with business English skills whilst helping them improve their TOEIC scores. They are also using the score of the TOEIC for course placement and learning evaluation (Takahashi, 2012; Tsedal, 2019). With the TOEIC as the countries' main English competency measurement instrument, students and workers tend to prioritize improving test-taking strategy. Many enroll in evening or weekend courses specialized in teaching test-taking strategies (Takahashi, 2012). Even though such courses can help them achieve higher scores, the English competency issue prevails.

In response to corporations' request, in 2020 the MEXT introduced EFL education policy reforms focused on oral communicative competence nurturing. To achieve this goal, English was made the language of instruction in EFL classes in formal education (Turnbull, 2018). In my experience, conducting conventional EFL classes using only English has always proved very ineffective in Japan. Generally, learners tend to remain quiet throughout the class when the use of Japanese is highly restricted. Following the introduction of the MEXT's new EFL policies, Turnbull (2018) investigated 261 EFL teachers and 373 EFL learners at the college level about their use of Japanese in EFL classes.

68 percent of students and 74 percent of teachers reported that they used Japanese "sometimes", "often" or "always". Turnbull (2018) introduced the translanguaging pedagogy and investigated the participants' views on its adoption in EFL classes in Japan. 45 percent of students and 40 percent of teachers were favorable, while 37 percent of students and 27 percent of teachers were neutral. Considering the EFL learning environment and the outcome of Turnbull's (2018) investigation, it seems reasonable to state that adopting the translanguaging pedagogy in EFL classes in Japan is appealing. It would contribute to engaging learners and have them participate actively in-class activities.

In a survey that investigated Japanese EFL learners in one-on-one oral communication tutoring courses, Goli (2021) found that most respondents read work-related English documents and correspondence more often than they communicate orally in English. Consequently, the need for Japanese to improve their reading comprehension skills seems more pressing than expanding oral communicative skills. Accordingly, I personally think that reading comprehension courses based on translanguaging pedagogy should be introduced first. This leads us to the research questions:

To what extent can the translanguaging pedagogy help Japanese EFL learners improve their reading-comprehension skill?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 The three level of reading comprehension

Herber (1978) put forward a reading comprehension construct that consists of literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehensions. He describes literal comprehension as the ability to grasp the meaning of text by just reading and referring to literal information it contains. The ability to read text and establish connection between information it contains, and comprehend the author's intended meaning is referred to as inferential comprehension. Lastly, evaluative comprehension is the ability to read beyond a text, apply previous knowledge, and evaluate information (Herber, 1978, cited in Chu, 2017, p. 22). Subsequent empirical studies have supported Herber's multidimensional notion of three level reading comprehension (Chu, 2017), and EFL researchers have referred to this notion to foster and evaluate learner's reading comprehension ability.

2.2 Development of reading comprehension ability

King (2007) argues that the ability to infer main ideas from a text is critical to make meaning and comprehend the text. Pressley (2000) has shown that it is necessary for teachers to explicitly teach comprehension skills for students to acquire the ability to understand texts. According to Grabe and Stoller (2011), reading instructions in L2 should focus on guiding learners to grasp the main idea of texts through class discussions that help learners make connections between the text and their background knowledge. Thus, learners should be urged to help explain main ideas to their peers in group activities. August and Shanahan (2006) also reported that having learners work collaboratively in a group increases their literacy comprehension. However, Grabe and Stroller (2011) insist that it is crucial to encourage learners to make use of all the languages they know. The instruction approach suggested by Grabe and Stroller (2011) and August and Shanahan (2006) overlap with the translanguaging pedagogy. Consequently, the adoption of translanguaging pedagogy appears a pertinent and promising approach to effectively assist Japanese EFL learners develop their reading comprehension.

2.3 Features of translanguaging pedagogy

The translanguaging pedagogy is a learner-centered teaching and learning method in multilingual classroom settings where the teacher acts as a planner and facilitator. The teacher strategically predetermines the language(s) of input and output and leads learners to use all languages they know to optimize learning of the subject matter (Canagarajah, 2011; Baker, 2011; Garcia and Li Wei, 2014; Lewis et al, 2012; Williams, 2012). Translanguaging pedagogy integrates various activities that encourage speaking, listening, reading, and writing in any of the languages the participants can use to communicate and make meaning. In an EFL class, participants could be engaged in an activity where they read a text in English and make a summary in their first language (L1) after a group discussion, investigate a topic in their L1, and report their findings in English, or vice versa (Nagy, 2018).

It is argued that all languages in the learners' linguistic repertoire are interdependent, and that leads to an interlanguage exchange, which in turn induces further learning by expanding on pre-existing linguistic and cognitive knowledge and ability.

It is also argued that translanguaging helps the development of the weaker language because learners develop oral competence and literacy in their weaker language when they undertake the main tasks at hand using both their weaker and stronger languages concurrently (Baker, 2011; Garcia and Li Wei, 2014; Lewis et al, 2012).

2.4 Translanguaging in reading comprehension development

2.4.1 Cases outside Japan

South Africa is a multilingual country with as many as 11 official languages, including English. In their quest for an effective multilingual language education pedagogy, South African language researchers have conducted a considerable number of studies on the effectiveness of translanguaging pedagogy. Regarding the development of reading comprehension, Makalela (2015a) investigated the effectiveness of translanguaging instruction on 60 elementary school children's reading comprehension in Sepedi, their home language, and English, their additional language. The participants were exposed to translanguaging instruction reading comprehension between the pre-test and post-test assessment. Instruction included alternating languages in the vocabulary induction exercises and silent reading comprehension in both Sepedi and English. (Makalela, 2015a) found that the participants were able to improve their reading comprehension in both languages, but the proficiency gain of English was bigger and closed the proficiency gap between English and the participants' home language.

In another study, Makalela (2015b) investigated vocabulary and reading proficiency gain in Sepedi, among a group of 60 multilingual pre-service teachers who use Sepedi as an additional language. The participants were randomly assigned to a control group and experimental group of 30 members each. The experimental group was exposed to a vocabulary and oral reading development course using translanguaging instruction. They were encouraged to use all their language repertoire. In contrast, participants in the control group were restricted to use solely Sepedi, the target language. The results showed that the gain in vocabulary of the experimental group was more significant than the gain in the control group; the experimental group scored an average of 86.6 out of 100, and the control group, 52.2. It was concluded that adult bilingual language learners can more effectively improve their vocabulary through a translanguaging pedagogy course.

Hungwe (2019) investigated whether using translanguaging and paraphrasing could improve reading comprehension of 36 multilingual medical school students enrolled in an English course for academic purposes. The participants were randomly assigned to an experimental and a control group. Participants discussed an English scientific article in sub-groups of 6, before producing individually two paraphrased summaries of a paragraph: one English paraphrased summary and another one in one of the languages in the participants' repertoire. Participants in the experimental group were encouraged to use all the languages at their disposal during group discussions. Following the analysis of the quality of the summaries, Hungwe (2019) concluded that reading comprehension skill could be improved using translanguaging and paraphrasing.

2.4.2 Translanguaging in Japan

While empirical research on the translanguaging pedagogy abounds in South Africa, studies about Japan are scarce. However, a study on the effectiveness of translanguaging pedagogy on reading comprehension development in Japanese educational settings was identified. Bartlett (2018) investigated 107 second-year college students split into two experimental and two control groups in a Japanese university setting. Interaction in the experimental groups was conducted both in Japanese, the L1 as well as English, the target language. Interaction in the control groups was restricted to English, and the use of Japanese was limited to situations where the L2 displayed limitations to give accurate instructions. Bartlett (2018) found that in comparison to the 51 students in the control groups, the 56 participants in the experimental groups had a higher level of retention and a wider variety of English language use in presentations. He also reported a higher level of motivation to study English in the experimental groups.

2.5 Necessity of the current study

The literature shows that the translanguaging pedagogy can effectively help EFL learners improve their reading comprehension. However, most research studies found in the literature were conducted in formal education settings such as elementary schools and universities. No study has been performed yet in continuing educational settings. Considering the pressing need for Japanese workers to develop their reading comprehension, this research will aim to investigate the extent to which the translanguaging pedagogical instruction can help improve Japanese EFL learners' reading comprehension, especially in a continuing educational context.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection

This research will take the form of experimental action research. An English reading comprehension course will be designed and taught to Japanese EFL learners aiming to improve their reading comprehension. Classes will be held

every Saturday, over 8 weeks, and each class will be 150 minutes. About 20 participants will be enrolled and randomly assigned to an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group will be subject to translanguaging pedagogy; they'll be allowed and encouraged to use both English and Japanese in group discussions through in-class reading comprehension practices. Exchanges in the control group will be limited to English, and the teacher will use Japanese for task instructions only when English shows some limitation. The course will be advertised on the internet, targeting company employees, aged between 18 and 60, who need to develop their reading comprehension for work. To ensure homogeneity of English ability among learners, only participants within predetermined TOEIC reading score range will be enrolled.

The participants will take the TOEIC test once at the beginning and once at the end of the course to collect pre-test and post-test quantitative data. To further evaluate the effectiveness of the course on the improvement of inferential reading skill, paraphrased summaries of the texts studied in class will be collected twice: at the first session of the instruction course and at the end of the course.

3.2 Analysis Procedure

A positivist approach will be adopted to evaluate the effectiveness of the translanguaging pedagogy instruction on improving literal reading ability. The quantitative pre-test and post-test data collected will be subject to statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics will be used to evaluate the performance of each group of learners. Inferential statistical analysis will be conducted to examine the performance difference between the experimental and control group, and determine the effectiveness of translanguaging instruction (Dörnyei, 2007; Paltridge and Phakiti, 2015). It will also help determine whether the findings could be generalized to EFL learning in Japan. The paraphrased summaries will be analyzed with a focus on the accuracy of the summary. The results of the language analysis could be compared to the participants' performance in the pre-test and post-test performance as a means of triangulation.

4. Ethical consideration

Participants will be informed of the purpose of the course. Measures will be taken to keep all the participants' identity and test performance data anonymous.

5. Limitations

The experimental instruction course of this study will last eight weeks. However, Hedgcock and Ferris (2009), and Oakhill and Cain (2007) argue that EFL learners should be exposed to reading comprehension instructions and practice over a longer time period for the instruction to be effective. Thus, the length of this experimental course could prove relatively short to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of translanguaging instructions. Another challenge is that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the experimental course will be held online. Thus, the learning environment differs from the classroom environment in normal circumstances. This may make it difficult to generalize the findings from this study.

6. Conclusion

As observed earlier, there are very few empirical studies concerning translanguaging pedagogy in Japanese L2 classes despite the strong presence of L1 as the language of instruction and the widespread practice of grammar-translation before the recent EFL policy reforms by the MEXT. Consequently, this study will help gain more empirical data in this area. The findings of this study could greatly contribute to determining the potential to widely adopt this pedagogical approach in Japan even though recent EFL policy reforms are pressing for L2 to be the only language used in EFL language classes to nurture oral communicative competency in formal education. If this study could help confirm the effectiveness of the translanguaging pedagogy to improve reading comprehension among Japanese EFL learners, it could help promote more research in translanguaging pedagogy to gather more evidence and persuade EFL policymakers to reconsider the newly adopted policies and approve the introduction of the translanguaging pedagogy.

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