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Pedagogical suggestions for improving a Japanese senior high school English textbook by focusing on micro-reading skills and task-based instruction

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Abstract

This paper proposes a lesson plan with suggestions for improving a MEXT-approved textbook, *CROWN English Series II*. *CROWN English Series* is a well-known textbook series for English teaching in secondary education in modern Japan, and it also has a big market share in each category of 'English I,' 'English II' and 'English Reading.' *CROWN English Series II* (2008) deals with culturally interesting topics and current global issues including Aboriginal culture and landmine clearing. However, it does not provide enough instruction and tasks for learners to improve their reading skills. It is partly because *CROWN English Series* has been taught by the *yakudoku* method, the Japanese version of grammar-translation method. What will be needed when the next "Course of Study," which demands that classes be basically taught in English, is implemented in 2013? I suggest a lesson plan which consists of three stages of instruction, pre-reading activities, during-reading activities and post-reading activities.

1. Introduction

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced a draft version of the new "Course of Study" for senior high schools at the end of last year, 2008. The "Course of Study" has been revised approximately every decade and the next "Course of Study" will be implemented in 2013. The new "Course of Study" requires for the first time that English classes must basically be taught in the target language, which might cause anxiety for many English teachers originally from Japan. It is generally supposed among college teachers in Japan that the proposed policy was derived from reflection both on the failure of *yutori* education or lighter curriculum and on the less communicative approach in grammar-translation centered lessons.

However, even before the proposed policy, the current "Course of Study" issued in 1999 and implemented in 2003 states communicative

abilities as overall objectives of foreign language education. In terms of reading, for example, objectives of "English II" are stated as follows, "To further develop students' abilities to understand what they listen to or read and to convey information, ideas, etc., by speaking or writing in English, and to foster a positive attitude toward communication through dealing with a wide variety of topics." This principle can be understood to include implications for meaning-focused and task-based reading activities. Nuttall (2005) is concerned with meaning-focused reading as communication, "specifically with the transfer of meaning from mind to mind: the transfer of a message from writer to reader" (p.3). Then, what has caused form-focused and less communicative class sessions? I assume that it might be useful to improve English teaching in senior high schools in Japan by both looking into a MEXT-approved senior high school textbook and suggesting

adaptations necessary for communicative interaction in class. I wish that MEXT-approved senior high school English textbooks following the new “Course of Study,” expected to be implemented in 2013, will be improved so that those textbooks can raise learners’ motivation to learn and willingness to communicate by suggestions from many people involved in language education, such as Nuttal (2005) and Rosenkjar (2009).

I was inspired to write this paper based on the work of Rosenkjar (2009) and I will follow his approach roughly in terms of structure, analysis of a unit from *CROWN English Series II* (Sanseido, 2008), making suggestions for teaching text-attack skills with this unit, and finally I will present my original tasks promoting learners’ communicative abilities.

2. Description and Analysis of a unit from *CROWN English Series II*

To begin with, I chose the textbook *CROWN English Series II* to deal with in this paper, thinking about its potential influence, partly because *CROWN English Series II* (2008) is ranked top in terms of the market share among the forty-five MEXT-approved textbooks in the category of “English II” in 2008 (*Jiji Press*, 2008, p.9) and also because learning English with this textbook can mean high status, learning in a competitive secondary school in Japan.

The textbook mainly consists of ten reading lessons, three supplementary reading lessons, and five activity workshops. Each main lesson has the same structure, a reading text accompanied by grammar explanations and exercises at the end and also one dialogue lesson, “Chat Room,” dealing with a topic related to each main lesson, which is discussed between a Japanese student and a friend of his/hers originally from abroad.

I chose “Lesson 6: Mysteries of the Mona Lisa” from *CROWN English Series II* (2008) for

my lesson plan, not only because I like visual art and the topic and I hope learners will get involved in learning with visual materials, but also because I expect to some extent the movie of *The Da Vinci Code* might motivate learners to read the text.

The unit starts with the picture of the Mona Lisa printed in color with the lesson title and words by Schweitzer, “as we acquire more knowledge, things do not become more comprehensible, but more mysterious.” The unit includes some other pictures by Leonardo da Vinci, a Japanese painting influenced by the Mona Lisa, and a humorous image of the Mona Lisa before the main text. Most of them are printed in color. Although such pictorial information tends to be effective for motivating readers, the unit does not have any pre-task for reading before the main text.

The main text is divided into four sections, after a brief introduction including a question, “Why is the Mona Lisa so famous?” The first section is about the mystery of the model: nobody knows who the model was. The second section is about the history that the Mona Lisa has been becoming famous. The third section discusses why the Mona Lisa is so lifelike. The fourth section analyses the painting style which Leonardo da Vinci developed as an answer to the mystery in the third section.

All the main text pages also have pictorial information in color and learners can find textual information in each bottom margin, glossing with phonemic transcriptions, idioms and syntax to learn with example sentences, and comprehension questions in English easy enough to answer just by looking for the part referred to in each question. Only the comprehension questions in the bottom margins are something like during-reading tasks. Those comprehension questions might have been designed as signpost questions (SPQ) in order to direct learners’ “attention to the important points in the text,

preventing them from going off along a false track.” (Nuttall, 2005, p. 157.) However, the answers are too obvious only if learners can find a sentence related to each question. Nuttall (2005) informs us, “the best SPQs relate either to the whole section... or its final part, so that they cannot be answered until the whole section has been read and understood.” (p. 161)

The post-reading section at the end of the unit consists of “Comprehension,” “Feedback,” “Grammar,” and “Exercises.”

“Comprehension” consists of a True/False comprehension check by listening to statements related to the text and summary completion by reading, which is, in some other reading lessons, replaced by information organization completion by reading. According to McGroarty and Taguchi (2005), “comprehension with restricted response” is one of the least communicative exercises, even if it is a listening task (p.215). And also, in order to complete each summary or each information organization task, students are only required to look for information in the main text, which is only a mechanical process, not communicative at all.

The “Feedback” section can potentially be better in providing communicative post-reading tasks. However, as it is, the section has only three discussion questions and interaction is not encouraged. The following three questions are listed in the “Feedback” section.

- (1) Do you think the Mona Lisa is mysterious? Why? Why not?
- (2) Compare the Mona Lisa with Murayama Kaita’s “Lake and Woman” on page 85. Discuss their similarities and differences.
- (3) Leonardo da Vinci is also well known as an inventor. Check the Internet and report what you find.

(*CROWN English Series II*, 2008, p. 93)

The intention of the first question is quite

ambiguous. I can easily imagine that learners must be at a loss whether they should give any original response or they should summarize the final part of the reading text. The second question is much more explicit and it is feasible for learners to find something similar or different in the two pictures printed before reading the text. So, I would use this question as a pre-reading task because such a discussion might activate learners’ schemata about visual art and how to describe it. The third question might have been intended as an expansion question, but I would say that there is a big gap between the reading text and inventions by Leonardo da Vinci. This unit does not offer any advice at all about how to describe inventions. The third one only provides a distantly related topic to the unit although the topic might be interesting.

The “Grammar” section consists of grammar explanations by presenting isolated sentences including a target grammar item. In this unit, examples include, “so have I,” “neither can I,” “whatever (whoever or whenever)” clause for concession, and comparative expressions such as “than I had expected” and “than she used to be.”

The “Exercise” section consists of mechanical exercises with vocabulary and grammar, such as definition quizzes by multiple choice, fill-in the blank exercises on prepositions and parts of idioms, completing short compositions based on a Japanese translation. There are also fill-in the blank exercises by paraphrasing and exercises of translating parts of Japanese statements into English. They are totally not communicative and without any context or creativity.

The “Chat Room” section presents a written dialogue which is done with a topic related to the main lesson text between a Japanese student and a friend originally from abroad. In this unit, the topic is a Japanese *ukiyo-e* portrait painter, Sharaku. There are no tasks attached but some language information is printed in the bottom margin, presenting paraphrased expressions,

glossed with a phonemic transcription, and an idiomatic expression with an example sentence. However, in terms of cultural sensitivity, I would think highly of the content itself, connecting the main reading with the learners' background culture. Matsuda (2002) noticed, "many English learners and even some teachers still perceive English exclusively as the language of the inner circle [of English speaking cultures] and the purpose of learning English to be merely to access [in Japan] the inner circle culture" (p.183). In order to raise students' willingness to communicate, students should be encouraged to talk about their own cultural background as well. Otherwise, foreign language learning neglecting learners' cultural identity would be promoted.

It is unfortunate that the textbook with a top market share in the category of "English II" includes hardly any communicative activities even though the textbook deals with interesting reading texts like "Lesson 6: Mysteries of the Mona Lisa." That is why I will propose in the next section a lesson plan based on the unit providing some suggestions and adaptations to the original material.

3. Principles for Adaptation and a Lesson Plan Proposal

I will start with how to deal with form-focused instruction abundant in, or nearly comprising the whole original unit. As Rosenkjar (2009) acknowledges, form-focused instruction for accuracy is not wrong in itself, but insufficient by itself, if teachers tend to neglect communicative activities focusing on fluency. Also, thinking about the educational context of secondary education in Japan, most students are sensitive to college entrance exams, which are still form-focused in general testing accuracy for superficially fair and objective judgment. Apart from the validity of such a type of college entrance exams, it would be unrealistic to

encourage senior high school students to learn only fluency-based communication neglecting their instrumental motivation. In this sense, I would include the original exercises at the end of the unit in my lesson plan.

The unit structure, as it is presented in the current edition, totally neglects schema-activation and meta-cognitive process of reading for learners. I would say that this serious deficiency is mainly derived from the assumption that Japanese senior high school students are basically expected to read an assigned text in the textbook before the classes. Following that assumption, most activities or exercises are designed to be done after the text reading just for checking comprehension. In this way, teachers cannot grasp students' background knowledge, how a student's process of understanding is progressing and how he/she can get to such an understanding or to such a misunderstanding. Worst of all, the teachers' questioning in class seems to be oral testing of memorized facts, not helping students to express their understanding of the text.

Thus, I will propose pre-reading activities to activate learners' schemata, during-reading activities to teach text-attack skills raising learners' meta-cognition on how they can read to understand the text, and also post-reading activities to expand learners' understanding by "relat(ing) the text to the outside world" (Nuttall, 2005, p.167). In the proposed adaptation, I try to include the concept of "a task" as far as possible with the definition that it is an activity which requires learners to interact in the target language, focusing on meaning rather than on form, hopefully with a tangible outcome, which I ascribe to Ellis (2003) and Rosenkjar (2009).

The purpose of the pre-reading activities should be activating learners' schemata and raising their motivation to read. For this unit, I would ask learners to make as large a list as possible of English vocabulary including proper

nouns which they think are related to the Mona Lisa and Leonardo da Vinci. For example, "portrait," "invention," "The Last Supper," "Louvre Museum" can be included. This work can be done in pairs. After the pair work, the teacher encourages volunteers to write their list on the board and appoints other pairs to do so. The teacher should collect learners' lists to make a whole-class list for feedback later to see how much learners' expectations will be satisfied by the text reading. Then, the learners are provided with a handout of pictures by Leonardo da Vinci and modern works imitating any work of his. Learners are expected to choose one picture and provide some reason to choose it and brief description of the picture in English, as a written exercise. This can also be done in pairs. The teacher reads the written work and asks the whole class to guess which picture it refers to. As the final pre-reading activity, the teacher asks learners to predict what is mysterious about the Mona Lisa, which can be a signpost question to provide a purpose for reading the text.

Individual reading processes, that is, what is happening in a learner's mind during silent reading, have scarcely been focused on in English teaching in secondary education in Japan. The classroom has been just a place to confirm the model translations provided by teachers. Nuttall (2005) provides word-attack skills and text-attack skills as reading micro-skills focusing on the reading process. I would recommend word-attack skills, and text-attack skills such as recognizing and interpreting cohesive devices and recognizing functional value for during-reading activities in my lesson plan.

I chose word-attack skills first, which Nuttall (2005) deals with separately from the text-attack skills. This is mainly because Japanese students tend to use a dictionary very frequently without enough inference based on grammatical structure, morphology and context. It is quite natural that such learners cannot make the best

use of information in a dictionary. As an activity, the teacher asks learners to highlight words in the text or in the glossary in each bottom margin which are unknown to them or they feel uncertain about. Then the teacher asks learners to try to infer the grammatical category and meaning of each new word based on the grammatical structure and the word's morphology. This gives them a classroom context to learn how to use a dictionary in an efficient and appropriate manner. Learners can discuss with their partners for this activity. For example, although a learner may want to check the word "surrounding" in a dictionary, he/she can infer its meaning, something like "about" from the sentence structure and the context surrounded by "some mystery" and "the Mona Lisa."

Cohesive devices include pro-forms (reference and substitution) and lexical cohesion (Nuttall, 2005), which are abundant in the unit. Recognizing and interpreting cohesive devices enables learners to understand that some separate language items in a text are closely related in meaning and make coherence in the text. In the unit, it is important for learners to understand the difference between "Mona Lisa" and "the Mona Lisa." When the author says "Mona Lisa," it refers to the model. And when the author says "the Mona Lisa," it refers to the portrait. Especially in the first paragraph in the first section, "Who is this lady?", "this lady," "a young woman," "her," "a certain Florentine lady," "Lisa," and "the wife of a rich merchant, Francesco del Giocondo" all refer to the same person, who is supposed to have been the model of "the Mona Lisa." It also appears in the beginning of the second section as "the subject." On the other hand, throughout the text, "the Mona Lisa" is replaced by "the painting," "the drawing," "this one portrait," "the artwork." In order to clarify the distinction, learners can be asked to highlight substitutes of "Mona Lisa" and those of "the Mona Lisa" in different colors.

Functional value includes “independent functions” and “text-dependent functions” (Nuttall, 2005, p. 101). In order to grasp the flow of ideas in the text, recognizing “text-dependent” functional values of each sentence and what kind of relation a part has with other parts is necessary. For example, the second paragraph in the first section begins with a sentence with an asserting function, “As the fame of the painting grew, people began to guess at other identities.” The second sentence has a function of exemplifying the assertion. The third sentence starts to explain the comparison, and reinforcement follows in the fourth sentence. The fifth sentence provides the hypothesis while the sixth and the seventh sentences show objections to it. The functional value of the seventh sentence is commenting and the final sentence gives a conclusion to the example theory. The teacher should provide learners with functional labels at first and ask them to match the appropriate functional label to each sentence. (e.g. asserting, exemplifying, explaining, or concluding.) Then the next step can be asking learners to fill in a diagram of the text structure provided by teacher.

The purpose of the post-reading activities includes giving feedback to learners about what they learned in the main reading and also expanding learners’ understanding by “relating the text to the outside world” (Nuttall, 2005, p. 167). The first activity I propose is an expectation reward check, which is based on the vocabulary list made by the class as part of the pre-reading activities. In this activity, the teacher asks students if their expectation for the text has been rewarded.

The second post-reading activity can be a picture-formation task. The teacher cuts some enlarged versions of pictures on the handout given for the pre-reading activity into four pieces. A piece is distributed to each learner at random with the backside up. Each learner must neither

show the part of any picture assigned to him/her to the other learners nor say the title of the picture even if he/she can figure out what the picture is. Their task is to exchange information on the part of picture assigned to them and look for the other three people who have a part of the same picture. The outcome is to have the pictures on the handout put back together by active interaction. In this activity, learners can recycle some expressions related to visual art, such as background, outline, expression, horizon and so on, to describe their piece of the picture.

The third activity can be the original form-focused activities printed in the textbook. The form-focused instruction can be reinforced by the next *sugoroku* activity for a group work. *Sugoroku* is often glossed as an equivalent to backgammon, or a board game. The teacher provides each group of three or four people with a *sugoroku* sheet with language items for practice, either vocabulary, idiomatic expressions or grammatical structures. In the *sugoroku* activity, learners must make a sentence including an expression they meet by throwing dice on the *sugoroku* sheet. The final post-reading activity is a task to make a flyer for a mini-exhibition featuring only one picture. This task takes time and the teacher can make it homework.

The adapted lesson plan for the unit consists of the activities in the following three tables starting on the next page. The format follows Rosenkjar (2009).

Table 1 : Pre-reading activities

| Step | Time | Tasks (Teacher) | Tasks (Students) | Interaction | Purpose |
|------|-----------|--|---|-------------------------|--|
| 1 | 3-5 mins. | Introduction to topic: T asks Ss to make a list of English words related to the Mona Lisa and Leonardo da Vinci. | Ss list related words. | S ↔ S (in pairs) | Activating schemata |
| 2 | 5 mins. | T asks Ss to make the list on board. | Ss (Volunteers) make the list on board. | T ↔ Ss (whole class) | Activating schemata; raising solidarity |
| 3 | 15 mins. | T provides a handout of pictures by LDV and imitations after his. T asks Ss to choose one picture, explain reason for the choice, and write a brief description of the picture in English. | Ss choose one picture from the handout, explain why, and write a description. | S ↔ S (in pairs) | Facilitating Ss' communication about the topic; encouraging Ss to write original comment in English |
| 4 | 5 mins. | T reads each pair's description of a picture from the handout. | Ss guess which picture is being described and explain reasons. | T ↔ Ss (whole class) | Intensifying Ss' interest in the topic and their concentration on listening; listening for information |
| 5 | 5 mins. | T asks Ss to predict what is mysterious about the Mona Lisa. | Ss try to predict based on their background knowledge or just by imagination. | S ↔ S (in pairs) | Providing a purpose for reading the text |

Table 2 : During-reading activities

| Step | Time | Tasks (Teacher) | Tasks (Students) | Interaction | Purpose |
|------|----------|---|---|---|---|
| 6 | 20 mins. | T asks Ss to highlight unknown words in the text. | Ss find unknown words to highlight. | T → Ss (whole class) Ss (Individually) | Preparing Ss to learn efficient use of a dictionary |
| 7 | 20 mins. | T asks Ss to infer meaning and function of unknown words. | Ss try to infer based on context and morphology. | S ↔ S (in pairs) | Learning how to use a dictionary effectively |
| 8 | 20 mins. | T asks Ss to check a dictionary with discretion. | Ss try to figure out meaning and function of unknown words. | S ↔ S (in pairs) | Learning how to use a dictionary judiciously |
| 9 | 20 mins. | T provides Ss with feedback on critical words and expressions. | Ss check their understanding. | T → Ss (whole class) | Providing meta-cognitive feedback on how to use a dictionary |
| 10 | 10 mins. | T tells Ss to draw boxes around the pronouns and substitutions in the text. | Ss find pronouns and substitutions to draw boxes around them. | T → Ss (whole class) Ss (Individually) | Preparing Ss to see cohesion through pronouns and substitutions |
| 11 | 10 mins. | T asks Ss to identify lexical cohesion. | Ss categorize pro-forms into each referent group. | S ↔ S (in pairs) | Recognizing how pro-forms make cohesion in the text |
| 12 | 10 mins. | T gives multiple choice questions on the function of key sentences. | Ss choose one function from the list. | Ss (individually) | Recognizing text structure |
| 13 | 10 mins. | T tells students to fill in blanks in the diagram of text structure. | Ss fill in the diagram. | S ↔ S (in pairs) | Understanding visually how the text is organized |

Table 3 : Post-reading activities

| Step | Time | Tasks (Teacher) | Tasks (Students) | Interaction | Purpose |
|------|-----------|---|--|------------------------|---|
| 14 | 3-5 mins. | T asks Ss if their expectation for the text has been rewarded. | Ss check the vocabulary list they made in the steps 1-2. | S ↔ S (in pairs) | Giving feedback about what they learned in the main reading |
| 15 | 10 mins. | T cuts an enlarged version of pictures on the handout given in step 3 into four pieces. Each learner is given a piece of a picture. | Ss exchange information about their piece to find the other three people to put together to form a complete picture. | Ss ↔ Ss (in groups) | Active interaction to reach a tangible outcome |
| 16 | 30 mins. | T asks Ss to do the original form-focused activities. | Ss do exercises in the book. | Ss (Individually) | Focus on form and accuracy |
| 17 | 15 mins. | T provides each group of three or four Ss with a <i>sugoroku</i> sheet with language items for practice. | Ss make a sentence including an expression they meet on the <i>sugoroku</i> sheet by throwing a die. | Ss ↔ Ss (in groups) | Promoting fluency on a form-focused activity |
| 18 | Homework | T asks Ss to make a flyer for a mini-exhibition featuring only one picture from the handout given in step 3. | Ss create original flyers. | Ss (Individually) | Producing a textual and visual work for assumed visitors; writing an original advertisement in English. |

4. Implications for future textbooks and classroom activities

The most serious problem with the current version of the textbook, *CROWN English Series II*, is that it does not have effective means for instructing students on how to read an English text. It is ridiculous that a textbook for reading does not teach reading skills, even though the textbook includes many culturally interesting topics.

The *yakudoku* method persistent in English teaching in Japan would not easily change without paying attention to the reading process in individual learners' minds. However, the next "Course of Study," which requires English teachers to conduct their class sessions basically in English, will be implemented in senior high schools in the academic year of 2013.

I am very interested in how the textbooks which have long been used by the *yakudoku* method can be revised for the implementation of the innovative "Course of Study." Instruction for learning text-attack skills and task-based instruction would have an important role in improving teaching materials and classroom activities for communicative interaction in English.

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Appendix

The reading text from Lesson 6: Mysteries of the Mona Lisa in *CROWN English Series II*, pp. 86-92.