An eclectic L2 Japanese reading approach: maximising instructional influence and meeting learners’ motivation

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The two projects were conducted at a university in New Zealand where learners of Japanese study in less than optimal situations due to a lack of exposure to their target language and culture. While some of the findings are context-specific, integrating the obtained findings reveals a universally important factor for language teachers. That is, the influence of instruction and the importance of learners’ affective aspects should not be underestimated.

Project One investigated how 14 learners of Japanese responded to graded readers (GRs), i.e., readers used in extensive reading. In this project, the participants conducted a think-aloud task, using GR versions of famous Japanese literary texts. They then also compared the GR versions to the original texts. Exit interviews were conducted to delve into the participants’ response toward the two types of texts. This first project revealed that whereas the less proficient participants tended to react to the easier GR versions favourably, the advanced participants demonstrated negative perceptions toward reading such simplified texts. The advanced participants furthermore showed ‘no pain, no gain’ attitudes which are a reflection of the intensive-reading-oriented instruction they received.

Conducted in the same context, Project Two examined how learners of Japanese perceived reading in their target language by means of a cross-sectional questionnaire survey. 123 learners of Japanese from four university courses expressed what factors made L2 Japanese reading fun and what factors made L2 Japanese reading difficult to get into. The survey revealed a change of learners’ confidence and motivation to master L2 Japanese reading according to the different class levels. This second project extrapolates that the intensive-reading-oriented instruction the respondents received failed to make L2 Japanese reading a conquerable task, and instead weakened these learners’ confidence as they progressed their study. However, the fact that language-learning related factors were the dominating motivational sources raises a warning against turning to alternative approaches such as extensive reading disproportionately. That is because intensive reading may have satisfied learners’ language-learning related motivation.

In sum, the findings from the aforementioned two projects suggest that a balanced eclectic reading instruction can be employed to maximise the positive influence of instruction and respond to the learners’ affective aspects. Specifically, intensive reading satisfies learners’ motivation to learn discrete linguistic features during L2 reading, whereas extensive reading makes the mastery of L2 Japanese reading more accessible and realizable for learners. Furthermore, the two projects imply that explicit reading guidance addresses learners’ biased perceptions and ignorance towards alternative approaches such as extensive reading.

Dr. Mitsue Tabata-Sandom received her Ph.D. in Japanese from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand in 2013. She has been teaching and coordinating courses at all levels in the Japanese Program at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Her research specialty is the reading development of learners of Japanese as a second language.

The talk is open to the public, and light refreshments will be served.

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