Effects of assuming a reading level that readers can comprehend in writing Easy Japanese[1,2]

Daisuke Fujiki[a*]

[a]Faculty Education, Aichi University of Education

1, Hirosawa, Igaya-cho, Kariya, Aichi 448-8542, Japan

*Corresponding Author: dfujiki@auecc.aichi-edu.ac.jp

ABSTRACT

Many parents or guardians whose children need help learning Japanese in school have difficulty using Japanese themselves. One of the useful ways for teachers to communicate with these parents in writing is through the utilization of Easy Japanese, which means Japanese with easy words and expressions. To examine how teachers can use Easy Japanese, student teachers were asked to rewrite a message from school. In the results of this experiment, the group that was asked to rewrite the message for a second-grade reading level used a greater number of easy words, simpler expressions that were easy to understand, and more accurate expressions than the group that was not asked to use a second-grade reading level.

Keyword: Easy Japanese, student teacher, writing, audience awareness

1. Introduction

With the rapid internationalization of Japan, the number of foreign children studying Japanese in schools is increasing. Many of these children's parents or guardians have difficulty using Japanese; nonetheless, in their involvement in the children's schooling, they inevitably encounter information services, such as announcements and bulletins.

English is generally used to communicate with people who cannot understand Japanese. However, for those who cannot understand English as well, an alternative is to use Easy Japanese (Sato, 2004) or basic and simple Japanese words and expressions. Easy Japanese requires familiarity with about 2,000 words and a number of basic structures of simple sentences covered in Japanese classes for beginners. The style corresponds to the coverage of level 3 or 4 of the old Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), the difficulty level of which is comparable to that of second- or third-grade primary school

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[1] This study was presented at the 79th Annual Convention of the Japanese Psychological Association.

[2] This study was conducted in the author's Seminar in Learning Science class at Aichi University of Education in school year 2014, as a collaborative project with graduate students Midori Suzuki, Emiko Hokao, and Shingo Hattori, also enrolled in the class.

textbooks.

Thus, the necessary skills for using Easy Japanese are meaningful for teachers in presenting information about a school to parents or guardians. However, having a good command of Easy Japanese is difficult for teachers who do not have expert knowledge of Japanese language education; selecting the appropriate words and expressions is not easy for them.

Hence, a research on writing for comprehension, especially one that focuses on writing with audience awareness, is of value for reference. Audience awareness is the writer's ability to select the appropriate words and expressions for readers. Flower (1979) said that the ability to write depends on whether writers are conscious of the readers or not. However, being aware of the audience does not necessarily affect writing, according to the findings of Redd-Boyd and Slater (1989). Their research found that audience awareness showed no effect in five studies and inconsistent results in another three. In addition, many studies (e.g., Roen & Wille, 1988) have provided evidence of the effect of audience awareness not on preparing drafts but on revising written output.

Writing with audience awareness is a dual task: to produce text, while assuming the knowledge level of the intended readers. In addition, the writer has to consider the appropriate expressions to make the text easily comprehensible for readers. However, imaging texts with adequate expressions for readers will decrease the writer's cognitive load. The writer, hence, should write intelligible and accurate text together with basic words and simple expressions. This study asked student teachers to rewrite school messages into Easy Japanese with the assumption that the text should correspond to level 3 or 4 of the old JLPT. The study examined further whether they were able to produce adequate rewritten text.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants were 60 students (21 male and 39 female) who attended the teacher licensure class of Aichi University of Education in school year 2014. The average age of all participants was 19.7.

2.2 Procedure

Two types of booklets were distributed simultaneously and randomly to all participants. One type of booklet was designed for the experimental group and the other, for the control group. The experimental group consisted of 31 participants, whereas the control group had 29 participants. The participants were not told their group assignments.

The booklet provided an explanation on Easy Japanese in the first two pages, including its aims and reasons. Further, the rules for rewriting Easy Japanese were specified in the

explanation: "limit important information," "paraphrase difficult words and phrases," "add explanations for words as needed," and "use simple words," among others. The next part presented the passage to be rewritten, taken from a textbook used in a Japanese junior high school class. The participants were asked to read the passage for 10 minutes.

The next pages in both booklets had a message from the school on the after-school care program. The message included 48 easy words, which were in the range of level 3 or 4 in the old JLPT, and 27 difficult words, which were in the upper range of level 2. The participants were tasked to rewrite the message to Easy Japanese within 10 minutes. Additionally, the booklet for the experimental group instructed the participants to assume rewriting for second- or third-grade primary school texts or picture books for lower grades.

3. Result and Discussion

Table 1 shows the number of easy words and difficult words used in the rewritten messages. Statistical analysis included a two-way ANOVA of the two groups (control and experimental) and two difficulty levels (easy and difficult), which indicated that the interaction was significant ($F_{(1, 58)}$=5.47, p<.05.). Using simple main effects analysis, the effect of group on easy words was significant ($F_{(1, 116)}$=7.32, p<0.01).

Table1

Average numbers (SD) of words used in the rewritten messages for each group

	Easy words	Difficult words
Control	54.23 (14.46)	12.03 (4.58)
Experimental	62.07 (16.10)	11.90 (4.01)

In addition, two graduate students of Japanese language education evaluated the degrees of intelligibility and accuracy of the participants' rewritten messages based on five-point Likert scale. The mean ratings (*SD*) of intelligibility were 1.94 (0.93) for the control group and 2.34 (0.95) for the experimental group. These ratings had marginal significant differences (t(58)=1.69, p<.10). The mean ratings (*SD)* of accuracy were 3.00 (0.93) for the control group and 3.41(0.76) for the experimental group. Similarly, these ratings had marginal significant differences (t(58)=1.88, p<.07).

These results indicate that assuming what are comprehensible texts for readers while rewriting the message to Easy Japanese did not reduce the number of difficult words in the rewritten text, but rather increased the usage of easy words that tended to make the message more intelligible and accurate. In other words, the assumption of reader

comprehension as regards written text had the effect of improving the piece further, even though the task to rewrite to Easy Japanese per se required the participants to write intelligible text.

The demand to communicate with people who have difficulty using Japanese will increase in the future. Thus, the skills in using Easy Japanese will be useful for teachers.

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