Strategies Used by Children When Reading *Manga*[1]

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Abstract

Reading *manga* (Japanese comics) is generally thought to be a mindless activity and is frowned upon in school because it distracts children from "real" learning. With data from surveys and interviews, this article describes a number of strategies children develop as they teach themselves to read these multimodal texts. In addition, strategies they form for dealing with reading problems, such as vocabulary recognition and text comprehension, are presented. These strategies are learned gradually and sustained through repeated practice. Despite children being able to develop such language skills informally, teachers tend not to value their abilities.

Introduction

The *manga* (Japanese comics) publishing market in Japan is a 4.5 billion U.S. dollar business, and accounts for nearly 40% of the total publishing market (JETRO, 2006). These publications range from manga for children to manga for adults, and cover every conceivable topic from sports, romance, drama, science fiction, adventure, and mystery, to niche interests such as business enterprises, gambling, fishing, cooking, and child rearing.

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Manga are classified into a number of categories, roughly corresponding to different age groups: *kodomo* (children); *shōnen* (boys); *shōjo* (girls); *seinen* and *yangu* (young adult men); *redīzu* and *fujin* (women); and *seijin* and *shakaijin* (adult men and, increasingly, women) manga. The market is evenly balanced between manga geared toward children and those targeting adults. Successful manga generate spin-offs such as toys, costumes, and other media products, like video and computer games, animation series, light novels, and television dramatizations.

Combining illustrations and text to tell a story results in a multimodal text (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). However, unlike other multimodal texts with these combinations, manga are created with a careful balance between text, graphics, and panels (Saito, 1995). Most manga are stories, thus they can be categorized as graphic novels. These stories are generally serialized, often for several years. In order to understand a story, the reader has to process the different layers of meaning conveyed by the layout of the pages, illustrations, scripts, and words (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2003). This knowledge is learned informally, outside of the classroom. Yet, it does not mean that manga literacy is automatically acquired. It is learned through repeated reading and practice, with the additional support of other manga readers, including family and/or friends (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2005).

Formal Literacy and Schooling

By the time they go to preschool, most children have learned to read *hiragana* and also their name in *kanji*. There is a wide range of children's books, picture books on DVD, as well as television programs, such as *Okāsan to issho* [Together with Mother] (Ingulsrud & Kai, 1997) that

engage parents and children in reading readiness activities. Many public libraries also have story time sessions for young children during weekdays, reflecting the assumption that parents, especially mothers, are expected to read to their children. At preschool, the emphasis is not on explicit language learning, but rather on training children to work together in groups (Ben-Ari, 1977; Peak, 1991). However, children are surrounded by text at preschool and day care centers. There are signs on doors, notices on the chalkboard, and children's names are written on their belongings. In school, they would see the three scripts, while on the way to school, they would be able to see advertisements and signs not only in *kanji*, *hiragana*, and *katakana* but also in words using *romaji,* English, and possibly other scripts.

Once children enter elementary school, the learning of *kanji* begins in earnest, as it is learned formally and only at school. In grade 1, the children have to study 80 *kanji* (MEXT, 2004), beginning with the ones that appear to be the most iconic, such as the *kanji* for mountain or river. These are similar to the ones used in a comparable language textbook for first year Chinese children (Ingulsrud & Allen, 1999). At each grade level, the amount of *kanji* to be learned increases. By grade 4, children are expected to have mastered 640 *kanji*, as well as *katakana*. In grade 4, they are also taught *romaji*. It is during grade 4 that many children begin reading manga seriously, as they have acquired enough knowledge of the different scripts to do so. By the end of elementary school, children would be expected to have learned 1,006 *kanji*, of which 90% are used in newspapers (Gottlieb, 2005). After elementary school, children move to junior high school for three more years of compulsory education. By the time they have completed this, they are expected to know 1,945 *kanji*. Those students

who continue for three more years in senior high school would spend time deepening their knowledge of Japanese, through the study of literature and translating texts written in older forms of Japanese.

Although many children begin to become literate at home, school is still considered to be the place where children really "learn" to be literate because this is one of the main functions of the first years of schooling. This is particularly important in Japan with the learning of *kanji*. As a result, teachers often disregard what children have learned at home, since this is not part of school literacy. Such an attitude towards the kind of skills children may have acquired outside of school is not unusual. For example, in her work with Native American children, Elizabeth Noll (2000) described the gap between literacy practices in and out of school and the teachers' lack of awareness of the children's abilities.

School literacy is presented as a set of discrete skills that can be taught and tested. It is also a symbol of appropriate values and beliefs (Barton, 1994; Ferdman, 1990). In her analysis of the rise of compulsory state schooling in 16th Century Germany, Carmen Luke (1989) describes how literacy was considered to be fundamental to implementing Lutheran theology, adopted as a social ideology. With ready access to the printing press, schoolbooks were able to be mass-produced. These factors led to the development of public schooling, and with it, the ranking of students by ability, curricula, and examinations. Literacy was hierarchically organized as a set of skills so that there was a steady development of skills. What was learned in one year became the basis for the next, and this hierarchical organization was reflected in the curriculum and teaching materials. Centuries later, these practices are still part of modern public schooling

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throughout the world, and the way literacy is defined and taught in Japan reflects this kind of approach. Reading texts are graded and skills are taught in a sequential manner. By being defined in such quantitative, hierarchical terms, school literacy becomes formalized and thus dominant, as it serves as the basis for success in school and, by extension, success in the work world. Poor performance in reading tests is regarded as a failure on the part of the institution or even the education system as a whole to fulfill its task. This can be seen in recent proposals to increase the amount of time spent studying Japanese, in response to the poor performance on international surveys of academic abilities ("Panel: Increase study hours," 2006).

By becoming a standard for success, school literacy marginalizes other kinds of literacy since they are considered unimportant. Yet, these other literacies do not disappear and can exist both at home and in school. For instance, the books, comics, and magazines children read at home may also be brought unofficially to school and shared with friends (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2003; O'Brien, 1998). Indeed, one of the current themes of literacy studies is finding out what children do read out of school, so that teachers may have a clearer understanding of the range of reading skills their students actually possess. It is assumed that this knowledge would then lead to more successful teaching, by enabling teachers to build on skills students already mastered (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000; Marsh & Millard, 2000). In Japan, for example, the widely held belief that school children are not reading enough is seen as one of the main reasons for the decline of literacy, especially logical thinking and reading *kanji* ("Kids found lacking," 2006). Hence the promotion of reading in and out of school in recent years ("Ministry to

assign," 2005). Yet, what is considered to be appropriate reading material by adults often differs from the kinds of texts children read enthusiastically outside of school. Furthermore, the texts children chose to read informally are not necessarily graded according to the same criteria as those in the formal school setting. These texts are read because children want to read them instead of being made to read them.

The Research Context

The information we present on reading manga is part of a wider project on manga literacy (e.g., Ingulsrud & Allen, 2007). For this article, we have confined our discussion to reading practices up to the end of junior high school, the final stage of compulsory education. In addition, we have also only focused on individual literacy practices rather than communal ones. The information is drawn from a variety of different sources. For instance, in 2005, a survey was given to 321 second-year senior high school students in a school in the Tokyo metropolitan area. Following the survey, a number of students agreed to be interviewed about their reading of manga. In 2003, a similar survey was given to 449 junior high school students in three schools in the Tokyo metropolitan area.

In addition to these surveys and follow-up interviews, we conducted a further set of interviews. We asked 10 readers, ranging from 6 to 13 years old, to perform a task. Before the interviews, we inquired about the title of their favorite manga and purchased a copy. In the course of the interview, we then asked the readers to take a felt pen and trace their eye movements on the paper. By doing so, we intended to see what readers read and what they left out. We also attempted to see what readers deemed as salient in

the text.

These tasks were not conducted under experimental conditions. Although we tried to purchase the latest editions when possible, we did not control for the readers having read the episode or not. Yet, the children stated that they had not read the particular installment in the magazine we had purchased. Another limitation is that tracing with a felt pen does not represent an accurate account of eye movements, only an approximation. However, perhaps more accurately than eye movements themselves, the method elicited reader attitudes.

Based on the information collected, we were able to observe patterns of reading behavior that went across the range of readers. We have analyzed two main kinds of reading strategies. One is a sequential pattern, involving the order in which manga is read and the parts that are focused on, in contrast to the parts that are less emphasized. The second is a pattern of rereading. Rereading is done for a variety of reasons, involving different reading skills at each sitting.

Readers tended to ignore parts they thought were irrelevant and used a variety of reading strategies. These strategies involve decoding the structural features of manga, that is, the text, speech balloons, characters, background, panel shape, and order of arrangement. Some of the strategies were so common among readers that we are able to provide a tentative hierarchy.

 ➢ The most important is the text in the speech balloons. This is what all our readers read.
 ➢ The second common point is the characters' faces, indicating that facial expression contains a great deal of information.

As we explain our findings, we first discuss the reading of written text in manga and then rereading as a strategy.

Reading Written Text

One twelve-year old boy was a careful reader. He had chosen the manga, *One Piece* (Oda, 1997), and told us, ["I simply look at the characters to see who is talking to whom"][2]. This reader focused directly on the speech balloons. Yet, there were some panels where he paused. He did this when there was an unexpected turn in the story. Another boy, aged nine, also focused on the written content in the speech balloons. He had chosen the manga, *Kochira Katsushika-ku Kameari Koenmae Hatchūjo* [The Police Station in front of Kameari Park in Katsushika] (Akimoto, 1976). Based on his tracing, he seemed to look at every panel, character, and speech balloon. At the same time, he said, ["I usually don't read here"], referring to panels without speech balloons. This appears to be the case with most of our readers who skipped this kind of panel. We suspect that many manga creators are aware of these reading strategies. Recently, it is rare to see manga with extensive commentary in panels or on the margins. Instead, the commentary is worked into the speech balloons.

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[2] The square brackets are used to show that the text has been translated from Japanese into English. In the quotations, as much as possible, we have not corrected any grammar errors so as to retain a sense of the children's voices.

Rereading Strategies

In the surveys and interviews, one of the areas we concentrated on was how readers dealt with reading difficulties. These reading difficulties were mainly those of vocabulary and panel sequences and they steadily declined over the years, as the readers became more competent. Table 1 illustrates proportions of students admitting to having experienced reading difficulties. It should be pointed out that the students were reflecting on past practices, and thus could have had difficulties in remembering.

Table 1

Difficulties Reading Manga Among Junior High School Students

Level	Girls			Boys		
	Yes	No	DK	Yes	No	DK
Initial Girls n = 357 Boys n = 331	48%	35%	7%	46%	37%	17%
Grades 1-3 Girls n = 330 Boys n = 335	39%	44%	17%	32%	52%	16%
Grades 4-6 Girls n = 344 Boys n = 338	31%	57%	12%	31%	59%	10%
Junior H. S. Girls n = 348 Boys n = 334	25%	68%	7%	32%	60%	8%

Among those students that did report reading difficulties, we asked for the kind of help they sought. The next table, Table 2, shows the types of strategies the readers used in addressing their difficulties.

Table 2

Strategies for Dealing with Reading Difficulties

		Pre-school	**Grades 1-3**	**Grades 4-6**	**Junior High**
Girls	Reread	60%	65%	77%	74%
	Ask someone	22%	22%	13%	13%
	Other strategies	18% (n=100)	13% (n=76)	10% (n=61)	13% (n=55)
Boys	Reread	60%	56%	66%	78%
	Ask someone	32%	34.5%	24%	16%
	Other strategies	8% (n=93)	9.5% (n=64)	10% (n=67)	6% (=64)

For both boys and girls, rereading the difficult part is the most common way of dealing with reading difficulties. The category of asking someone for help includes a parent, sibling, or a friend, with parents being the largest group followed by friends and then siblings. Other strategies include ignoring the difficulty and reading on or looking up in a dictionary. One of the reasons why rereading is so important as a strategy for dealing with difficulties is that many students stated in interviews that they did not like to admit having such problems. Since manga are considered easy to read, it is embarrassing to acknowledge having any difficulties, especially among older children. With most of the *kanji* being rubied, that is, transcribed in *furigana*, it is possible to look up words in a dictionary or verbally ask someone.

Table 3 illustrates how often readers reread their favorite manga.

Table 3

Amount of Rereading of Manga by Junior High School Students

Level	1 Time	3+ Times	10+ Times
Initial			
Girls	17%	58%	25%
(n=331)			
Boys	13%	54%	33%
(n=304)			
Grades 1-3			
Girls	12%	54%	34%
(n=252)			
Boys	8%	50%	42%
(n=268)			
Grades 4-6			
Girls	11%	57%	32%
(n=310)			
Boys	7%	53%	40%
(n=303)			
Junior H. S.			
Girls	11%	56%	33%
(n=304)			
Boys	8%	50%	42%
(n=308)			

For both girls and boys, rereading manga is a common pattern. In addition, there is a sizable number who reread their favorite manga ten or more times. These results suggest various possibilities. First, multiple rereadings are a way of dealing with reading difficulties. It would follow then that as readers' experience and familiarity with manga increase, the need to reread for understanding would lessen. For instance, one junior high school reader remarked, ["I understood how to read just after reading a lot of manga"].

Yet, rereading is not only a strategy for dealing with difficulties. It can be part of the enjoyment of reading. A possible reason for this rereading is the manga text's multimodal nature. The interaction of panels, graphics, sound effects, and dialogue lend themselves to rereading in that the readers would be able to understand the story more deeply with each reading. In addition, the content and characters may be attractive enough to sustain interest over multiple rereadings. This phenomenon is similar to the results of surveys in Britain, where it was found that young children regularly reread their comics and magazines (Coles & Hall, 1997). Rereading thus seems to have various functions. It can be a way of learning how to read manga; a comprehension strategy to deal with reading difficulties; and it can also be used to further the enjoyment of reading.

Rereading in a Single Sitting

In order to discuss further the nature of the rereading, a distinction can be drawn between rereading at a single sitting compared with rereading at multiple sittings. In an interview, one reader, a fifth grade boy, demonstrated his rereading strategy. He traced the manga (at his suggestion) twice, each time using a different colored pen; light green for his initial reading and blue for the second reading. On his first reading of *Mr. Fullswing* (Suzuki, 2001), he focused on the illustrations and traced the faces of the characters. Unlike other readers, he skimmed most of the speech balloons. For some of the ones he skipped, he said, ["I will read this later]. We are able say he skimmed because in this particular manga, the text is written vertically. He read quickly: ["I want to know the content sooner; I want to know the point"]. That was not the only reason as he explained, ["Well, I

glanced around and I thought this and this might be interesting"]. This was preparation for the second reading.

The strategy that this reader uses is reminiscent of the top-down reading process, that is, first trying to comprehend the macrostructure or the gist, and then later trying to comprehend the microstructure or the details. However, his reading process appears more complex than a simple top-down strategy. On the first reading, he read the frame with the commentary that described the episode in relation to past episodes. This was unlike many of our other readers who ignored any commentary outside the speech balloons.

On the boy's second reading, not all the speech balloons were read. Only selected ones were read, although they were read in sequence. He said, ["Most of the interesting lines are written in bold; and I thought these (selected) panels were just interesting"]. When he did read a speech balloon, he traced each line. He later mentioned that the more interesting panels tended to be the larger ones. In the interviews, we were interested in whether the selected parts were necessary for the comprehension of the whole. That was less of a priority for this particular reader, who was more interested in isolating interesting parts and finding the jokes. When investigating the skills required for manga literacy, we have tended to focus on the skills of understanding main ideas, the story line, and inferences, particularly in the gutter or space between the panels. We assumed that comprehending the whole story was a necessary prerequisite. Instead, we have found that readers focus on character dialogue, skip contextual commentary, skim for points of interest, and scan for jokes.

This strategy of rereading in one sitting may not be an isolated

phenomenon. In an interview with a senior high school student, we found another reader who also used a variety of reading strategies when rereading at a single sitting. This is how she described the way she reads manga:

> [First, I read the lines generally. But in the second reading, I can afford to read the pictures and the background more slowly. That's because I've already read the lines. I sometimes skip in reading a new manga so I can read many times to find out the part I haven't read yet. (In the second round) I look at each line and the main characters' faces. Then I look at the small pictures in the corner. That's where there are fancy pictures.]

As this reader pointed out, rereading is done at varying speeds and for different purposes. Through rereading, readers can gain a greater understanding of the story and, by doing so, they develop a greater appreciation of the text.

In the interviews, we found that everyone was a flexible reader, employing a variety of strategies. Virtually no one attempted to read everything all at once. There was, however, one reader who did seem to try to read everything. He gave up after a few pages. We later found out that he was a reluctant reader and only read manga to keep up with his friends, who were all avid manga readers. He was able to watch the animated version of his manga to get information about the story, rather than depend on his reading skills.

In general, readers read for different information each time, as their purposes for reading vary. Frederik Schodt (1986, p. 18) reports that manga readers read at the estimated speed of 16 pages per minute. It is misleading to compare this to the speed-reading of prose, which is measured in terms

of a comprehension test. The reading of manga is not tested, nor are readers compelled to read. It is likely that readers read different stories at different speeds, reflecting their different purposes for reading. In a 430-paged issue of the weekly *Shōnen Jump* (Kodansha, 1968), for instance, not all the stories would be of interest to all readers. Those that do not attract a particular reader would presumably be flipped through quickly. Those that are attractive would be read more carefully.

Rereading at Multiple Sittings

The survey and interview data also showed that many of the readers reread manga at different sittings. Given the multimodal nature of manga, and thus the layers of meaning, rereading is a comprehension strategy. Reading a favorite manga repeatedly can help the readers become familiar with the author's style, as described by this senior high school girl:

> [Actually I couldn't understand them (symbols) when I was little. But I read my favorite manga so many times and it helped to understand them after that. If I read manga many times and know the subsequent story, it helps me to understand the previous part.]

However, rereading whether at a single or multiple sittings is not just a comprehension strategy. It can also be part of the pleasure of reading. This was true of elementary and high school readers. For instance, enjoyment was the reason a nine-year old boy reread his favorite manga:

> [All of *Corocoro* and the others I've read over a hundred

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times. Yes, because it's fun. I've read it (*Dangerous Jiisan*) over one hundred times in my free time…There are so many funny parts. I have read the current issue many times.]

Conclusion

Readers do not learn to read manga at school. Readers learn to read manga on their own with the help of others and they begin at an early age. As they do so, they develop a number of different strategies, determined by the manner in which they learn to read manga, including reading the multiple features of these multimodal texts. For instance, during the initial reading of the story, they tend to focus on text in the speech balloons. They may then focus on characters' faces. Generally, no one tries to read everything all at once. Readers reread frequently both at single and multiple sittings. Purposes for rereading include learning to read manga, a comprehension strategy to deal with reading difficulties, and a way to enjoy reading. Because there is no attempt to read everything in one sitting, there appears to be enough material to sustain interest in subsequent sittings.

The results of this study indicate that children use a variety of strategies when reading manga and thus reading these kinds of texts is not a mindless activity. Although reading a manga sequentially is similar to most forms of school literacies, the strategy of looking for interesting parts first and then going back to reread them is also not unrelated to school literacies. While these connections may exist, it is perhaps inappropriate to subordinate manga literacy in the service of school literacies. For children read manga by their own choosing, and it is in this existential space where they possess the opportunity to read avidly. What skills are acquired in such avid reading settings are only beginning to be examined. Yet, when considering a child's

literacy skills, the measures of school literacy skills may indicate only a partial assessment of how well a child can read.

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