

# **A Look Inside the Basic Reading Skills Course At Kanda University of International Studies**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents basic insight to the freshman Basic Reading Skills Course at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) and explains how it attempts to promote learner autonomy in students. Initially, an overview of the educational context and institutional expectations is presented so that the roles both the teacher and students have within the course can be better grasped vis-à-vis the course content and outcomes. Additionally, recommendations for future research and course development are discussed in an effort to illustrate not only the progressive nature of the course content but also the continually changing nature of how we have come to view the process of Reading especially over the past few decades.

## **Educational Context**

The Basic Reading Skills Course (BRSC) is a unique and individualised programme of study in place at KUIS. It is one of a number of specialised proficiency courses developed at KUIS, that coaches students to make choices and become more autonomous, allowing them to decide their rate of progress and route of study through the course. The final outcome is to provide students with an inquiry framework that will enable them to think independently and

solve problems (IRA/NCTE: 1994).

Just over 3,000 full-time students attend KUIS and nearly half are in the English Department. The BRSC is a requisite first year course for English majors. Each year students are organised into roughly 15 classes of 26 to 28 students, separated into four proficiency streams according to individual student scores obtained from an in-house institutional test called the Kanda English Proficiency Test (KEPT). The BRSC has been called an “example of learner autonomy in practice” (Imrie, 2004: 25) and reflects the overall philosophy behind the English curriculum offered at KUIS.

### **Institutional Expectations**

Alongside a ‘reading’ goal, the BRSC has an important learning goal, which is to foster responsibility, and differs from what most students have been exposed to previously. First year students are likely to be used to teacher-fronted classrooms (Duppenthaler et al, 1989: 95; Koike and Tanaka, 1995: 24), grammar-translation method, a focus on accuracy over fluency, receptive over productive skills and may often be highly dependent on their teacher. Such teaching methods are still felt to be necessary to pass the outdated university entrance examinations (Lo Castro, 1996: 47; Morrow, 1995: 87) which along with Japanese textbooks (Browne and Wada, 1998: 105; Reesor, 2002: 49) do not reflect curriculum change. However, the BRSC instructional materials challenge the traditional roles of the learner and teacher, “facilitating the process through which students become the manager and planner of their own courses of learning” (Imrie, 2004: 25).

This change in focus from the teacher to the learner is not entirely unproblematic. It is commonly accepted that the BSRC is quite likely a new way of learning for Japanese students and presents a steep-learning curve due to the fact that classrooms in Japan are often teacher-fronted with the teacher viewed as the transmitter of all knowledge. Furthermore, students are likely to have been passive observers in high school, and while they may have participated in pair and group work they may not have a lot of experience with expressing personal opinions, negotiating meaning and encountering the possibility of multiple ‘correct’ answers, or experience self or peer correcting. However, it is often forgotten that teachers may also be unfamiliar with altering the traditional roles from ‘assessor’ to ‘prompter’ and ‘controller’ to ‘facilitator’ (Harmer, 1991). The novice BSRC teacher must too overcome a steep learning curve when starting this course since often the teacher and students need to renegotiate their individual and collective attitudes and behaviour towards learning. These are some reasons for close contact between new and veteran teachers of the BSRC.

## **Objectives & Outcomes, Content & Activities, and Future Development**

Reading research and practice have undergone numerous changes in the 25 years since TESOL was first established (Grabe, 1991: 375). In the mid- to late 1960s, reading was seen as little more than a reinforcement for oral language instruction and reading was used to examine grammar and vocabulary, or to practice pronunciation (Grabe, 1991: 377). However, throughout the years, emphasis has been placed on the ‘active’ nature of reading. People stopped viewing reading as a receptive process from text to reader, and more as an

interactive process between the reader and the text (Day and Park, 2005: 6; Grabe, 1991: 377; Robinson, 1993: 225). Reading is now seen as a shared process, with the reader's prior knowledge and experience being used to help interpret the writer's message. As a result approaches to the teaching of reading increasingly include interactive exercises and tasks. Comprehension questions have also seen drastic changes and teachers and materials developers alike are striving to ensure that their question types enable students to interact with the text to create or construct meaning and to thus think critically and intelligently.

Many individuals have recognized the importance of reading questions and several (Barrett, 1972; Pearson and Johnson, 1978; Day and Park, 2005; Bloom, 1956; Grabe, 1991) have developed taxonomies which differentiate various types of questions. Some have done this in a second language context (Nuttall, 1996) and some have attempted to create a hierarchy (Gerot, 1985; Thompson and Gipe, 1985; Anderson, 1990) of difficulty. However, there is a lack of research in the creation of a hierarchical taxonomy for reading programme evaluation and materials development. Such a taxonomy could not only enable us to understand our students' responses, but could be used as a checklist for teachers and materials developers to ensure that the various forms of questions are used to help students respond to a variety of types of comprehension questions. However, perhaps the main purpose in constructing a taxonomy of reading comprehension questions is to understand what types of questions our students are good at and where they need help and practice. That is, it can be used as a criterion to assess varying levels of reading comprehension questions.

As teachers, curriculum developers and materials developers, we require information on what types of questions we include in our courses and which of these our students find easy and difficult. Such information can aid us in critically evaluating our course, in understanding student responses to our questions and in creating materials for students of higher and lower levels. After a review of previously constructed taxonomies including those developed by Barrett (1972), Bloom (1956), Pearson and Johnson (1978) Gerot (1983), Nuttall (1996) and Day and Park (2005), research is necessary to develop a more suitable taxonomy for materials development. Using the BRSC, a plan is underway to design a simple taxonomy that can be used as a checklist when evaluating the inclusion of question types and creating new material. Furthermore, while it is possible that the skills used in the BRSC are not one-dimensional and a hierarchy of skills may be problematic due to the influence of factors such as vocabulary familiarity that may make certain 'lower-order' *literal comprehension* more difficult than *evaluation or personal response* questions, a taxonomy is useful to assess what types of questions are included and which may be over or underrepresented.

One look at the BRSC reveals that it differs radically from traditional reading courses in place in Japan. Comprehension questions are designed in a way that students are forced to negotiate the meaning of the text as opposed to simply 'testing' their understanding of what they have been asked to read. Furthermore they are encouraged to connect the text to the real world and to their personal lives in various kinds of activities. Because of the rigorous demands on many Japanese students to succeed in a variety of 'Entrance Exams', many students have become pretty skilful at correctly answering

certain types of questions without truly understanding what they have read. This ‘test-taking training’ focus in high school does not necessarily provide for deep comprehension of texts. Within the BRSC, however, ‘testing of what has been read’ is subsumed within a larger category of learning. Students are encouraged to think beyond what they read. To this end, Hughes (2003) concept of beneficial backwash is engendered in students since they are learning habits that will stay with them and assist them as learners in general. Next, we will explore how the design of this course perfectly exemplifies what Gipps (1994:158) describes as the paradigm shift “from a testing culture to assessment culture.”

The BRSC is divided into two parts. Part One (completed in semester one) is an introduction, designed to help learners become familiar with this new style of studying reading: to introduce them to various kinds of activities and train them to take responsibility for their own leaning. Students sample a range of materials and work in a variety of settings, including individual, pair and group. Furthermore, Part One introduces students to negotiating meaning with peers and the teacher as they check their answers and correct their own work. There is no formal test at the end, rather students are under ongoing assessment. Crook’s research, (cited in Gipps, 1994) points to the fact that clearly stated and attainable sub-goals leading up to long term goals seem to engender student self-efficacy. Students with high self-efficacy tend to use deep learning strategies and persevere when faced with adversity. The development of these traits becomes increasingly apparent to the teacher over the duration of the BRSC culminating in the Student Portfolio being submitted at the end of the course.

In Part One of the course, students are coached by the teacher in the completion, collection and assembly of all of their work towards the construction of a Student Reading Portfolio. Work is required to be not only well organised in the portfolio, but also of a high standard. Students are also encouraged to keep a weekly update of their progress in their Student Journal, a part of the Portfolio. This fashion of collecting and assembling work continues in the second semester with a more detailed and activity-rich Portfolio.

In Part Two, which typically begins in Semester 2, students are completely autonomous. The teacher adopts a less central role and students control what, when, and how they study. Each student is required to participate in class activities, conversations, role plays, take up work alone or with others, submit it to the teacher, retrieve, organise and record it on a master “Credit Chart” in their portfolio. In essence, students “progress at their own rate and make their own route through the course” (Imrie, 2004: 25). Furthermore, they are given the opportunity to negotiate their grade and work towards achieving that goal. The students are empowered by the freedom to make choices: choices about what activity to do and with whom to work. By the end of each semester, each student has amassed a collection of all their work completed over 13 to 15 weeks.

Currently in Part Two of the course over 70 different activities are available for students to choose from. Consequently, at any one time, a BRSC classroom is likely to have some students working alone, some in pairs and some in small groups over a spread of text, task and skill based activities. The teacher is an active ‘participant’, involved throughout the class. This ‘participation’ elicits

itself in a variety of forms, checking completed activity sheets, watching/evaluating student role plays, listening in on or engaging in discussion/dialogue with pairs and groups of students, watching or listening to students who are actively engaged in activities; using the internet, reading a variety of other texts, listening to and completing dictation activities, and so on.

One of the more important parts of this course is the change in roles. The responsibility for the student grade moves from teacher to student. Students are aware of both the quality and quantity of work required for specified grades. They can work towards an 'A' grade knowing what is required to achieve their goal. In this sense, the grading is 'fair', 'consistent' and 'motivating' (Gipps, 1994).

### **Teacher and Student Roles in the BRSC**

While the BRSC is an attempt to nurture more autonomous learners the 'instructional' and 'guidance' role of the teacher should not be underestimated. Like other classes, teacher input is invaluable and students not only require but also want some form of teacher instruction, explanation and modeling. Furthermore, the rationale behind this course must be outlined to students; it is important that they understand its nature and importance in their overall proficiency.

The teacher as 'assessor' should also monitor and assess the student's work, to see how well they performed, how well they are performing and to track their progress. "Not only is this important pedagogically, but the students quite naturally expect it, even after communicative activities" (Harmer, 1991:



237). During this time, teachers are encouraged to correct exercises as a class, modeling answers, giving explanations and answering any question students may have. However, the teacher is encouraged to adopt the role of ‘prompter’ (Harmer, 1991: 235) as opposed to ‘assessor’ in class and *guide* them to the correct answer(s). This is very important in the BRSC where students often find the concept of the possibility of more than one correct answer difficult to comprehend.

Although students in any particular class have been placed as a result of their overall KEPT score, their range of abilities within each of the skills varies. The integrated approach taken in the BRSC allows the teacher to easily identify difficulties individual students may have in a particular area as a result of the continuous collection and monitoring of work, thus highlighting particular weaknesses for students to work on outside class.

It should be noted, however, that teachers as stakeholders should be prepared to move away from the role of ‘controller’ as the course progresses and towards a role of ‘facilitator’ where they maintain a low profile in order to make the student’s own achievement of the course possible. Teachers should progressively ask and encourage students to ask questions and negotiate the text in order to aid their comprehension. Thus, teachers need to be flexible in their approach to the BRSC and adopt a variety of roles throughout the course in order to provide a good balance of instruction and comprehensible input along with student input and negotiation.

## **Kinds of Appropriate Assessment**

The entire course assessment is of a formative (Hughes, 2003) nature in the sense that it continually feeds back into the teaching and learning process. Students create a portfolio of their work and are constantly required to monitor their own progress. In semester one, the BRSC consists of an episodic text. Students are introduced to the characters in the first episode and a variety of comprehension questions and activities follow each episode.

All these activities take the form of informal weekly assessments, and at times semi-formal or more 'planned' forms of assessment such as teachers commenting on rehearsed role-plays or listening in on a group of students negotiating the meaning of a listening activity via dictagloss. Eventually, the portfolio allows for a form of summative assessment in the instructor evaluating the result of a student's recorded work. Students are encouraged to keep a weekly self-assessment record as well. The entire process is quite similar to much of what McGregor and Meiers (1991) discuss that students plan and set goals, keep records and monitor their own progress keeping in mind the interconnectedness of teaching, learning, and assessment.

The teacher also monitors and keeps a record of student participation, progress and work week by week. This allows the teacher to view and reflect upon each student's performance in class and become familiar with each student in a low stakes environment, thus reducing student anxiety, promoting pupil engagement, and eliciting best performance (Gipps, 1994).

Students are held to a standard of holistic or high personal achievement, generally determined by the experienced teacher of the BSRC who acts as a mentor to those teachers who are new less experienced with the course. There are clear requirements and expected standards of participation of individual students and their work that are clearly outlined on a weekly basis for the duration of the BSRC. There is a strong attempt to foster communication between stakeholders, especially amongst the teachers involved with the course, and the teachers and students which can serve to enhance the teaching and learning process not only in individual classrooms but throughout the institution (Griffin & Nix, 1991).

## **Conclusion**

The Basic Skills Reading Course is unlike the traditional classroom where the teacher dictates student work and controls assessment. Students are provided with an equitable framework of fair and ongoing assessment which provides motivation to continue to make progress through the course while working to one's potential. Students are given choices and are able to make decisions on their own. With this choice and decision making comes responsibility and ownership of managing and planning their own course of learning, preparing them to acquire skills and habits to becoming independent learners throughout their careers at Kanda and beyond.

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