

Japanese learners and the task of reading poetry in a second language

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Abstract:

The aim of the present study was to evaluate the process of poetry reading for second language learning by coding conversational turns by pairs of language learners. Poetry reading is a close reading, meaning-construction task that involves top-down and bottom-up processing skills which extends understanding and can promote second language learning. This study used Skehan's (1998) methodology and position on task-based learning in second language settings. Selection of poetic texts was done using Tom Cobb's Lextutor vocabulary analysis tools. Four pairs of advanced young adult learners of English in Japan (5 female, 3 male) conducted small group format paired discussions. As result of this study it was possible to illuminate some aspects of poetry reading and make recommendations for language course design and implementation.

“Ordinary reading by nonprofessionals though idiosyncratic from historical or technical point of view, can be intensely interesting”

(De Beaugrande, 1997, p.40)

The teaching of literature in education comes from a humanistic approach to education in general which argues that a better understanding of others leads to a net gain for society in general (Carter & Long, 1991, Showalter, 2003). Literature can also offer engagement with creative language encouraging empathy and understanding new perspectives (Brumfit & Carter, 1986, Carter, 2004, Hall, 2005), and can be used in a variety of ways in educational settings. For these reasons, amongst others, poetry is often selected to be part of liberal arts curricula and second language learning (L2) contexts. Poetry *reading* in particular is a close

reading, meaning-construction task which connects the learner's developing language skills with their abilities to build meaning from texts which connects to these humanistic aims.

The current study makes use of Skehan's (1996, 1998) approach and methodology for analysis of tasks in L2 settings. What is particularly useful about this approach is that it focused on cognitive processes, which can change over time. Reading is also a naturalistic task which is part of the realm of *real world* language use, and therefore second language (L2) classrooms are highly suitable for the use of poetry and poetic texts (Hanauer, 2001). In the current study the task of reading poetry was investigated with the purpose of highlighting some of these connections and tentatively suggesting further areas for research.

Background

The aim of this paper is to build on a preliminary study by David Hanauer which looked at the role of poetry reading with advanced L2 learners (Hanauer, 2001). As Hanauer explains "At present, it is unclear if it is actually desirable to use poetry in the language classroom and if so what role poetry reading would actually have" (2001, p.296). Even those supporting use of poetry in language classrooms may not have empirical evidence to support their selection of poetic texts above other text types. For example, Hanauer cites one of the issues for those interested in the response of *real, non-expert, or ordinary* readers is that education research has often focused on purpose-created texts and analysis of the texts alone, not on the responses of readers. Hanauer's (2001) methodology, which used paired dyads talking in response to a focus-on-form prompt, was adapted for this study. In the 2001 study, Hanauer labelled his codes as follows: *noticing; questioning; interpretative hypothesis (IH); restatement of IH; counterstatement; elaborative statements of IH; world knowledge; integrating knowledge and general statement*. Hanauer found that *noticing,*

questioning and *interpretive hypothesis* were the three most frequently used categories of response. The results of this study revealed that the learners also used *questioning* and *noticing* frequently. Thus this paper contributes to the field of study by suggesting a role for poetry reading in L2 classrooms as well as for use in language course design and implementation.

Theoretical framework

In the 2001 study by Hanauer on which this paper is based, a task-based framework is central to justifying the method used. In summary, Skehan outlines a method for implementing a task in L2 settings. The theoretical framework in this study is to follow this method and meet all of Skehan's criteria defining a task:

1. meaning is primary
2. there is some communication problem to solve
3. there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities
4. task completion has priority
5. the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome

(adapted from Skehan, 1998, p. 95, cited in Hanauer, 2001, p.296)

There are several reasons why the Skehan framework was appropriate for use in the current study also. First, in L2 settings the task-based framework is highly adaptable and deemed suitable for classroom use. Second, the curriculum used in the learning setting was task-based and therefore very familiar to students. Thirdly, the element of problem-solving and task-completion were thought to be strong elements of successful in-class activities which it was hoped would benefit student learning. As a researcher and education practitioner,

seeking ways to develop language activities using a variety of sources is desirable.

Participants

Participants were students in the English department at a private languages university in Japan. The students were in their fourth year at the university, taking an elective course on entitled “Global Issues Through Literature” taught by the researcher. The course met for 90 minutes twice per week for the 15 week semester and this task was completed during week seven of the course. The eight participants (5 female, 3 male) had TOEIC scores of between 650 and 855. One of the student participants was a fluent speaker of Tagalog and English also fluent in Japanese. Five out of eight of the students had taken other literature courses such as courses introducing British literature or American literature at the university previously. In this paper the conversation of one pair of students is discussed in detail as they talked about one poem together.

The study took place as a voluntary task outside of class time and students were reimbursed for their participation. Students also transcribed the data and were reimbursed for the time transcribing this data. Students gave permission for their conversations to be used by giving their written permission in Japanese and English.

Methodology

In this task three poems were selected for students to discuss individually and in sequence (See appendix A). The poems were selected mainly for their length, topic, and suitability for the classroom task. The general topic of *identity* was selected as it was thought to be close to the learners own experiences and in previous classes this theme was received positively by students. The poems used are not reproduced in this report for copyright reasons. In this paper only “Identity” by Julio Noboa Polanco (1973) poem is discussed.

A link to the online version of this poem is available from the following teacher-resource page <learnnc.org/lp/pages/2893>.

The Polanco poem was assessed for its lexical difficulty using the Lextutor (Cobb, 2014) software which revealed that it contained some low frequency, difficult words. A lexical analysis of the Polanco poem using Lextutor's VocabProfile was conducted to determine the difficulty of the vocabulary in the poem. Lextutor uses the K1000, K2000, Academic Word List and the British National Corpus (BNC) to show the relative difficulty of a text through counting individual text tokens, given that learners of English are less likely to be familiar with low-frequency lexical items which are labeled off list (OL). By looking at the OL vocabulary it is possible to estimate the learning burden of a text. Estimating the learning burden of a text is an element of pre-teaching planning which teachers are recommended to undertake prior to presenting students with vocabulary in classroom contexts (Nation, 2001, p. 23). The learning burden is the amount of effort required to learn a word, which can be estimated when considering previous knowledge from the first language, the regularity of the spelling, and aspects of usage of the word which may be similar to other known words from prior learning or the first language. Knowing more about the possible difficulty of a text through a lexical analysis can help teachers to plan and predict which aspects of the vocabulary may present students with points of difficulty. In this case, using a short poetic text for the purpose of reading and comprehension, it was predicted that some low-frequency words would become points of discussion and require interpretation and possibly conversational interest. Since the task did not ask students to learn these words but instead to interpret the meaning with the aid of a dictionary and a partner, this was considered an acceptable element of the process.

As a result of the lexical analysis (see Table 1), several points can be interpreted. First, although the text is only 150 tokens long, it contains 100 different words (types).

This means that a high number of words appear only once, and the type/token ratio shows this relationship (given at 0.67). A second observation from this analysis is that the proportion of the text made up of OL words is reasonably high, at 12.67%, although not significantly more than other texts of common use in the advanced language classroom. This compares with the OL words in conversation (7.8%), fiction (10.9%), newspapers (15.7%) and academic texts (13.3%) used as examples by Nation (2001, p.17). Looking at these words prompted the decision that the poem would be best approached with the help of a dictionary, and that some words in particular such as “abyss” and “bizarre” if seen for the first time might present particular problems. This is because of their unusual spelling and pronunciation, along with the lack of other corresponding words in the family which might be known by learners. The only words which might be familiar to learners from their occasional use as loanwords in Japan, it was estimated were “breezes” and “eagle”. Since students would have time to check meaning using the dictionaries the number of OL words was decided to be challenging, but manageable, and would possibly present opportunities for discussion and language use.

Finally, to prepare the poems for the task, the researcher standardise the font and type size for the task. The punctuation added to the utterances was written by the participants themselves when they completed the transcriptions. No biographical information about the poets was given. None of the poems know the poet had been encountered by students in class, and no student reported familiarity with the poems.

Table 1: Selected data from a lexical analysis of “Identity”

	Lexical analysis data
Type/token details	Words in text (tokens):150 Different words (types):100 Type-token ratio:0.67
Off list words:12.67%	abyss, bizarre, breezes, clinging, clusters, eagle, eternal, fertile, fragrant, harnessed, jagged, lilac, musty, plucked, shunned, stench, swayed, vast, wavering

Procedure

The eight participants were divided into four pairs. The partners were selected by the researcher according to their schedule and availability to meet out of class time. The data were collected in individual sessions to each pair of students. Each session was held in a classroom where the researcher presented to the students the with the photocopies of the poems and the instruction sheet along with an audio recording device. Students had the opportunity to ask questions immediately before the session to clarify understanding of the instructions. This was done so that the researcher had an unobtrusive presence, while at the same time being able to monitor the progress of the participants. The conversations were transcribed by the students at home and the audio files and transcriptions were shared with the researcher within one week of the task date.

Data analysis

In this section the data is analysed using the codes created by Hanauer (2001) and applied to the current study. During the process of analysis a second research assistant was employed to look over the results of the coding by the main researcher. Due to the small number of items for coding a measure of internal consistency was not done. Instead, the researcher and the research assistant talked together about several codes which could have been added

to more than one category and decided to compromise by coding them according to the one code which it was felt was a best fit. Out of 80 codes for this conversation, only four of these codes were discussed in this way and thus an acceptable level of agreement and consistency was reached.

Results

In this section the Polanco poem is discussed in isolation. This is to allow a close reading of the results of this single conversation and to examine the suitability of the method for further investigation. The Polanco poem “Identity” was the third poem to be discussed and the conversation by students A (male) and M (female) lasted a full 15 minutes. Student A spoke 851 out of 1215 words in the conversation, while M frequently gave short utterances. There was a clear gap in understanding between the two students, with A being the more proficient and more clearly in control of understanding the text (see table 2 for the difference in total words spoken).

Table 2: Conversation on “Identity” by A &M

Total: 1215 words
A: 851 words
M: 364 words

In the 2001 study, Hanauer labelled his codes as: *noticing*; *questioning*; *interpretative hypothesis (IH)*; *restatement of IH*; *counterstatement*; *elaborative statements of IH*; *world knowledge*; *integrating knowledge and general statement*. The results of the coding system revealed that in this conversation between students A and M, that *questioning* was by far the most frequently used code, 37.5 percent (30 utterances). Examples throughout the

conversation were found, typically in the simple forms of “What?”, “Why?” “What do you think?”. Some examples from student A are as follows:

Line 64 A: What did he mean about eternal sky?

Line 78 A: What did he mean by ancient sea?

Line 80 A: So this flower is hanging by the sea on a cliff?

This result differs from Hanauer’s result which found questions to be used less frequently in most dyads, although questions were used significantly by his participants also. In this study, student A tended to ask questions to encourage student M to answer, while student M asked questions to clarify meaning overall. Further analysis of the type of questions used could provide evidence for developing pragmatic awareness. An imbalance in proficiency and understanding between the two speakers possibly resulted in a high number of questions overall in this one conversation.

Another frequently used code in this study, *noticing*, was used to a high degree in similarity with Hanauer. *Noticing*, 20 percent (16 utterances) drew attention towards words and phrases in the text. Although Hanauer keeps the definition broad enough to include literary terms, in this particular conversation, there were no cases of this type of item. As predicted in the vocabulary analysis, particular words such as “abyss” and “eternal” which were “off list” featured in a number of the coded items during this conversation. One reason why noticing was less frequent than in Hanauer’s study was that *noticing* was also done in collaboration with *questioning* and the questions were already coded separately. Hanauer notes this in his explanation of “progression 1.2: *noticing* and *questioning* sequence” (p.309). In selecting and coding individual items the system breaks up the conversation into utterances, although in doing so the flow of conversational sequence is invariably lost.

Table 3: Codes for the conversation by A & M

Code (No.)	Brief description	Examples
Noticing (16)	When directing attention to a particular aspect of a text. Includes quoting, noting words or phrases, repetitions, grammar and literary features.	“The vast eternal sky” “Abyss, abyss, abyss”
Questioning(30)	When a speaker asks a question directly relating to part of the poem.	“What?” “What did he mean by eternal sky?” “What do you think?”
Interpretative hypothesis(5)	When interpreting a section or individual word or phrase in part of the poem. Could be in answer to a question from partner. This code is direct evidence of the process of construction of meaning.	“So, he doesn’t want to be like a flower in a pot, because that’s just it. Like... that’s your whole life.”
Re-statement of interpretative hypothesis (7)	When confirming a previously voiced interpretation. Usually paraphrase, but not always.	“You’re just in a pot. You can’t do anything more” “You’re in a pot, you’re well guarded...”
Counterstatement (0)	When directly or indirectly contradicts a previous interpretation.	No codes found
Elaborative statement of an interpretative hypothesis (13)	When a previous interpretation is added to, or confirmed and then taken further. Used as evidence of development within the conversation.	“But, if you’re seen and you smell like a smelling flower..., you’re gonna be praised, handled, and then plucked.”
World knowledge (3)	When general knowledge from long term memory is presented as response to a question or interpretation.	“Flower makes the seed, so, new flower is blooming.”
Integrating knowledge (5)	When two things are linked. i.e. when two interpretative hypotheses are linked or when one is linked to a statement of world knowledge.	“But society has rules” “Strong and free. It has vitality”
General statement (1)	Personal comment made which is not connected to the analysis of the poem.	“Four minutes”
TOTAL: (80)		

Discussion

In the course of working with the Hanauer codes in this project, several issues have been raised. The first is a problem related to uncoded/uncodable data. Hanauer reported coding all of the conversations using this system, but in this study it was found to be difficult. The first type of uncodable data was in first language use (Japanese, italicised below):

Example of code-switching 1:

Student A: You're just in a pot. You can't do anything more. Sure, you're well fed,
well

watered, you're guarded, admired, but that's all like *Munashi tte nandakke* [what
does musashi mean?]

Example of code-switching 2:

Student A: What do you think? It's like even though you're praised and handled even
though you're praised humans are still going to kill you. Nah... not kill you, pluck
you.

Student M: Pluck you?

Student A: *Nukitoru* [pluck/pick]

In both cases Japanese is used to help clarify understanding although these do not fit into specific codes. Along with some of the other short statements, such as “mmmm” and other items, a degree of the conversation could not be analysed with the existing codes.

The second issue is in the distinction between *hypothesis* and *elaborative statement*, along with *world knowledge*. Although these can sometimes be seen as separately functioning ideas, the distinction between them in this study was sometimes difficult to define. A third problem or issue here was the high number of some code types and limited number of others. While it is initially useful to find a large number of questions used in this type of conversation, further analysis of the pragmatic use of these questions could draw nuances between them. Finally, through looking at a number of conversations between pairs of learners here, the issue of individual difference is a barrier to interpreting the data. Even though learners were in the same grade and have followed the same course of study, their proficiency levels were different enough to impede analysis. In other tasks created for language learning contexts these same issues could arise in discussions, group work and pair work, and teachers are advised to plan for such differences.

Conclusions

The preliminary findings of this study show that Hanauer's task codes for closely analysing the process of reading could be developed for further use in L2 contexts. The use of *questioning*, *noticing*, and other codes are all examples of linguistic output which could provide evidence for developing language skills. For example, the use of paraphrase in particular is a developing skill which requires top-down processing and is evidence of the cognitive processes involved in reading in the L2. Implications for curriculum design and implementation in this case could be that close reading of poetry does stimulate a range of linguistic responses, and that short poetic texts have a flexibility which could be exploited for use in multi-level classes. However, the results also showed that further investigation of the topic is required in order to clarify meaning in parts of the conversation such as uses of code-switching and the various reasons for employing questions when working with a

partner to construct meaning. Where further work is needed and additional coding systems developed is to look more closely at the use of the L1 in the conversations, pragmatic uses of language which show developing awareness of nuance and the co-constructed meanings which bring L2 users closer to a shared understanding of a text. All of these are all evidence of language development and could be supported in a number of ways by the instructor in L2 classes.

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Appendix A

POETRY READING TASK

This task will not be assessed or used as part of your grade.

Instructions

In this task you will be asked to read three separate poems and talk about them with your partner. You may use a dictionary.

Spend up to 15 minutes on EACH poem.

Discuss the three poems SEPARATELY.

Do Part 1, Part 2 and Part 3 of the task for EACH poem.

TASK

Part 1

Read the poem individually.

Part 2

Talk with each other to try and understand what the poem is about.

Part 3

Give a personal response to the poem. Talk about what you liked or didn't like about the poem.