

The roots of typical Japanese reading instruction: Revisiting the representative Japanese reading lessons implemented by Enosuke Ashida in 1915

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K-12 Japanese language teachers across the country use the following uniform approach to implementing reading lessons. For example, Fujimori (2018) observed several Japanese language classrooms and summarized typical reading instruction as follows:

1. Students read The Letter in *Frog and Toad are friends* (Lobel, 1970) aloud in pairs. Each pair chose the role of either the Frog or the Toad for reading aloud.
2. The class shared the question: did Frog and Toad exhibit the same level of happiness while awaiting the letter? Students wrote their opinions independently in their notebooks.
3. Every student shared their opinions, either agreeing or disagreeing with the aforementioned question in class.
4. Students sought arguments from the text that supported their opinions.
5. Every student shared their opinion in class again.
6. The whole class discussed and shared their reasoning based on the arguments in the text.
7. Students summarized their thoughts and wrote the essay (pp.165-166).

Reading aloud, analyzing the text to answer the questions, discussing, and writing an essay are common activities in most reading lessons around the country. The reason is that school education law made teachers use textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education; these textbooks follow The Course of Study, which describes the goal and recommended activities for Japanese language lessons in each grade.

For the reasons mentioned above, current typical reading lessons are not necessarily theoretical or research-based practices. Rather, they are defined by educational law and textbooks. However, we can see similar reading instructions about 100 years ago, and that lessons were evaluated as a new approach for teaching reading and research-based reading lessons by the Japanese language education scholar at that time.

In this article, I translate Enosuke Ashida's reading lessons to trace back the roots of a typical Japanese reading lesson to examine its rationale¹. This translation provides an essential resource in education research examining Japanese reading lessons in K-12 schools from an international perspective. Several Japanese education researchers and practitioners are still evaluating Ashida's reading lessons as

representative of today's instruction methods (e.g., Furuta & Saigo, 1970; Matsumoto, 1989; Fukawa, 2021). Therefore, it is reasonable to offer a translation of those reading lessons as a basic resource for assessment and discussion. For the translations, I referred to his lessons as presented in Japanese in *The Complete Work of Ashida Enosuke* (vol. 7, pp. 148-152) and translated the passages as follows.

Ashida's Reading Lessons dealing with *The Winter Landscape*

Enosuke Ashida, a fifth- and sixth-grade teacher at the elementary school affiliated with the Tokyo Higher Normal School, implemented three consecutive lessons for the fifth graders—one each day on November 17th, 18th, and 19th—in 1915. He used the text of *The Winter Landscape* (Iwaya, 1910, see Appendix), which had been included in the textbook for fifth graders approved by the Ministry of Education. Ashida kept a record of these reading lessons, describing each day as follows:

Day 1: The day of the first lesson came. I stood in front of the students. The classroom students in the morning were bursting with energy. I read aloud *The Winter Landscape* in the textbook softly. The students listened very quietly. Each student would have visualized the winter landscape familiar to everyone in the suburbs of Tokyo. I did not say anything. The students did not say anything either. However, a feeling of great satisfaction was growing in the students as well as me during this reading – aloud session. I realized that this feeling is the heart of learning to read.

I had to shift to direct teaching for the sixth graders since my classroom consists of the fifth and sixth graders. For their independent learning, I told the fifth graders to practice reading aloud and identify the places in the text that show the author's creativity. Twelve to thirteen minutes had been scheduled for this independent learning time, and the students promptly started their work. All the students read aloud fluently, even those who normally do not.

Reading aloud in a low voice became a humming sound and resounded throughout the classroom. The sound of reading aloud came to an end in a few minutes. I wondered if the fifth graders began to examine the author's creativity as they became silent. However, within a few minutes, reading aloud resumed. I presumed that the students strived to examine the traces of the author's creativity by reading aloud.

First, I made the students read the text aloud entirely. If one learns actively, it is fairly easy to read a unit of text aloud. Even those students for whom reading aloud is difficult could read fluently today. I realized the importance of the relationship between learning and text. My teaching often aroused controversy about the scarcity of reading-aloud practices, though it did not shake my principle. In the cases where we study as a whole class, making students read the same passages of text repeatedly only causes their feeling of weariness.

Next, I made the students say what they have found about the author's creativity. Each student

gave their opinions, but they could not speak logically. I said, “Is there a Chinese-style landscape painting in your home?” and they answered, “There is.” I asked, “Doesn’t this Chinese-style landscape paint mountains in the distance? Doesn’t this Chinese-style landscape paint a fairly clear view near the middle of the landscape? Doesn’t this Chinese-style landscape paint a crystal-clear view in the foreground?” The students all agreed, “Yes, it does.” “Landscape painting has this perspective. Didn’t you find any similarities in the text of *The Winter Landscape*?” I asked, and the students answered, “I can see. I can see.” They were pleased, as if a lost traveler at the crossroads had found the right path. The students explained, “The first paragraph is the distant view, the second paragraph is the middle-distant view, and the third to fifth paragraphs are the foreground view.”

I asked them, “Is there any other author’s creativity?” and one answered, “the rifle shot scene sounds interesting.” I replied, “Of course, this painting is written by watching the actual landscape, but to put the rifle shot scene in the last paragraph is the author’s creativity.” The students were very glad, as if that was the comment they wanted to say. I told them to read the whole text aloud and follow the author’s creativity; then, I shifted to direct teaching for the sixth graders.

Day 2: The following day, the 18th, the second period was the time for reading lessons for the fifth and sixth graders. First, I assigned the fifth graders to do independent learning. That included reading the whole text aloud, remembering their thoughts on the text from yesterday, and finding the unfamiliar words and phrases in the text for questions.

I ended the direct teaching for the sixth graders and shifted to the fifth graders. I made them read the text aloud once, and they read effortlessly compared to the previous day. “Drawing a landscape in perspective” and “breaking the silence by the rifle shot” seemed to be understood perfectly. Next, I asked them their unfamiliar words and phrases in the text, and there was only “the wind from the mountain,” “the blowing wintry wind,” “sweeping clouds,” “burned by frost,” “a big orange tree was bending,” and “ducks were looking for fish.” I heard the students’ explanations of those meanings. If they were correct, I confirmed, “that is correct.” If they were wrong, I corrected their mistakes in those meanings. The difficult problem regarding the students’ questions was “burned by frost.” There was no way to explain; they had to be able to see the real objects. I looked at the cedar hedges by the school commuting road, and they were still thick and green. So, I said, “Wait till the end of January. Those cedar hedges are going to be burned.” It was not long before I had to shift to direct teaching for the sixth graders. I told the fifth graders to “read the text aloud slowly while considering where such a place exists around Tokyo. In addition, if someone were to draw a picture based on the description, what would it look like? If I still have not come back to the class, write down the text in your notebook.” A student asked, “Teacher, aren’t there any other parts

of the author's creativity we have to examine?" I was pleased with such a question. I thought, "The one who studies actively should be like this." I said, "There is more. However, it is fun to find it by yourself rather than asking me. You can focus on the third and fourth paragraphs," and I shifted to direct teaching for the sixth graders.

I circulated among the fifth graders' desks while listening to the sixth graders' reading aloud. Students were reading the text aloud gently. There were already students who were struggling to draw a picture. I wondered if they had given up on drawing a picture. Some students wrote down the text. After a while, I finished the lessons for the sixth graders, and I went back to the fifth graders' class. Most of them had completed their pictures. I shared some well-drawn pictures from them. I then put together the students' thoughts by drawing a deplorable picture on my own based on the discussion with them. A problem arose while summarizing distant view, middle-distant view, and foreground view: "Teacher, where is the author?" Regardless of the genre, it is important to determine where the author is in the text. If learning gains its own momentum, all of the questions should arise from the students without any teacher's comments. I added, "doesn't it also matter when the author saw this landscape?" The bell for closing time rang at that time.

Day 3: The second period on the 19th was the last lesson dealing with *The Winter Landscape*. I started the direct teaching by saying, "There are a few remaining things to examine, aren't there?" and they raised their hands. There was no need to ask. I wrote "the author's creativity in the third and fourth paragraph," "the location of the author," "the time when the author saw the landscape," and "dictation" on the blackboard and instructed independent learning. I told them the third paragraph depicted the still objects and the fourth paragraph depicted active objects, and I lectured them that one has to consider that the author saw this landscape from the outside of the picture they had drawn yesterday when I came back to the fifth grader's class. The students had different opinions regarding when the author saw the scenery, but we concluded that the author had observed the landscape for at least ten minutes since we have to consider that the author had seen the hunter go into the forest along the ridge between rice fields and take a shot. I then gave the students a dictation test and checked the grades; that is, I counted the students who answered all the questions correctly, the students who had one question wrong, and so on. I instructed them to practice miswriting, particularly of kanji characters, and made independent learning voluntary, then shifted to direct teaching for the sixth graders.

Ashida's evaluation of the three consecutive lessons above was that the students were pleased from start to end. He also shared an essay about these lessons from one of the female students:

I like the time of reading lessons very much. I am looking forward to the reading lesson time, mainly when the teacher discusses the creativity of the texts. The texts we read became complicated when we became the fifth graders compared to the ones we read in the fourth grade, but there were a lot of fascinating texts, so I felt that reading lessons were more fun compared to the ones in the fourth grade. As in many interesting texts, *The Winter Landscape*, which we learned about today, causes loneliness and noisiness at the same time, but it feels good beyond description. I heard that the author is Sazaya Iwanami, who is a well-known old story writer. Mr. Sazanami indeed wrote it well, as might be expected since the public says he is a good writer. In the beginning, he wrote briefly about the distant scenery, such as mountains and woods. Next, he wrote about the middle-distant view, including the forest, and more closely about the rice field, crows, and sparrows. In the third and fourth paragraphs, the scenery of the foreground view was written in detail, as if you could take them in your hand. He carefully wrote about each object, such as the combination of colors and the way things moved. Somehow it is static until the fourth paragraph, but it comes to a “Bang” part in the fifth paragraph; the feeling of lacking something up until then is broken suddenly. An ordinary person tends to end with the fourth paragraph and without a fifth paragraph; he wrote the fifth paragraph to avoid causing the readers to be left with the feeling of lacking something. That is the first point we have to imitate when we write. I also learned to write in proper order from a distant view to a foreground view using perspective today.

Discussion

This paper translated representative Japanese reading lessons implemented by Enosuke Ashida approximately 100 years ago. The immediate objective of publishing this translation is to understand typical Japanese reading lessons as a first step to exporting Japanese language education research and practice insights. In the past, Japanese education scholars tended to limit their research, only studying overseas teaching methods according to their Japanese translations. However, Osada (2016) argued the necessity to change that one-way commutation by “exporting” Japanese education research and practices through English translations.

Ashida's lessons are similar, at least superficially, to those implemented around the country today. That is, reading short stories in textbooks repeatedly for analysis. However, there are significant differences between current typical reading lessons, which Fujimori (2018) described, and the one Ashida recorded by himself. First, Ashida started to ask students what they understood after the teacher read texts aloud at the beginning. Second, the questions for analysis arose from students in Ashida's lesson, but

the question was set by the teacher in Fujimori's (2018) one. Third, only Ashida's reading lesson seems to connect students' reading and writing, as one of Ashida's fifth-grade students had understood the author's creativity as a model for their own writing. Answering the question, did Frog and Toad exhibit the same level of happiness while awaiting the letter? It seems not to help the students writing compared to using perspective for writing landscape. According to an evaluation of Ashida's reading lessons by Kaito (1922/1977), the Japanese language education scholar in Ashida's era, those differences seem to be important. Future research is needed to examine the meaning of those differences by examining Kaito's evaluation.

Appendix

The Winter Landscape by Sazanami Iwaya

Autumn leaves that had decorated the mountain yellow and red were falling away, and all the mountains were covered with snow. The wind from the mountain was cold and harsh.

There was an old ginkgo tree in the dense forest near the shrine. It had no leaves anymore from the blowing wintry wind. It looks like an upside-down broom for sweeping clouds. There were two crows in its middle branch, and they did not move at all. There were only stumps in the large field. Nobody was there; even the remains of the scarecrows were gone. Sparrows came and flew out from an *Alnus japonica* tree on the ridge between rice fields.

The barley was growing well. Next to the barley, there were leeks and Japanese radishes. Only these small spots were colored fresh green as if they seemed not to know the winter. There was a farmhouse beside the field. Winter chrysanthemums were fully blossoming inside the hedge burned by frost. The branches of a big orange tree behind the shed were bending, bearing big yellow fruits.

The creek behind the house ran clear. There were no shadows of fish. Ducks were looking for fish, crunching on the frozen snow of the riverbank. A dog and man carrying a gun appeared from the woods and walked along the road toward the hill.

Bang! What did he shoot? The crows on the ginkgo tree flew away toward the mountain. The sparrows on the *Alnus japonica* tree also flew away immediately after the shot.

Notes

1. Enosuke Ashida (1873-1952) was an elementary school teacher. He started his career as an elementary school teacher in 1889. He worked at the elementary school associated with the Tokyo Higher Normal School, the current University of Tsukuba, from 1904 to 1921. His complete works, which comprise 25 volumes, were published in 1987.

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