

# English-Japanese Children with Deficient English Speaking Ability Learning to Read English in Japan

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## Abstract

The English reading progress of four British-Japanese children in Japan who attended local schools and learned to read English from their parents and in a weekly lesson was relatively normal, despite them being dominant bilinguals, quite deficient in English speaking ability. Their reading comprehension was indubitable, even though they could only produce in speech or writing much simpler, incorrect English. Instead of language ability, motivational maturity seemed to determine their progress, because they relied heavily on bottom-up processing, that is building up from the smallest units, phonic, etc, rather than top down from the story, etc. However, to our surprise and disappointment, even after three years of native-like reading progress and weekly, lengthy four-skill lessons with a native speaker teacher, their English speaking ability did not improve.

**Keywords:** balanced bilingual, dominant bilingual, reading progress, miscue analysis, top-down processing, bottom-up processing

## Introduction

This article reports how five bicultural children, each with one English-native-speaker parent and one Japanese-native-speaker parent, learned to read their foreign parent's language with a reading scheme, mainly read at home, and a weekly, three hour, small group class that the children came out of local Japanese schools for, in preference to the usual Saturday School. Materials, methods and the reading progress of the children during the three years that the class continued are described.

Then, on the basis of the reading progress results, the author addresses the following important concerns. What rate of progress in learning to read can be expected from dominant bilinguals? Is the quality of their reading the same as that of native speakers or balanced bilinguals? Does learning to read improve their speaking ability?

The answers suggested by the results of this teaching experiment lead to a more difficult question. If the quality and progress in reading of dominant bilinguals can be relatively normal compared to native speakers, why does it not necessarily affect their speaking ability?

## The Students

Children from bilingual families with one parent who is a native speaker of the local language and one parent who is a native speaker of a foreign language often have surprisingly low speaking and listening ability in the foreign parent's language. Even when the parents have followed a one parent one language policy, so that the child has been talked to and encouraged to talk in the foreign language since birth, many of these children are dominant bilinguals. That is, they are native speakers of their local parent's language, but definitely not native speakers of their foreign parent's language, which can be considered repressed by their dominant language. They are not balanced bilinguals, that is native speakers of both languages, despite their daily exposure since birth to both parents' languages.

All the children in this study had one Japanese parent and one British parent. All their families had a *one parent one language* policy, except a trilingual one which had a *home language* policy, another language. All were dominant in the local language, Japanese, except one balanced bilingual, the youngest one, who, unlike them, among other things had spent every summer holiday since birth in Britain. The trilingual was dominant in Japanese over his English, which was his third language in speaking ability.

When three of the dominant bilingual children (including the trilingual) were about seven and a half years old, at the beginning of their second year in local Japanese schools, and the one balanced bilingual child was six, at kindergarten a year before starting local school, the parents started a weekly class, which the children came out of school for, in order to manage teaching them to read English. A fifth child, another Japanese-dominant bilingual, did not start the program until he was beginning the fourth grade, just under ten years old. However, the conditions, home reading with a parent and a weekly three hour class, were the same. He started learning to read with me at the beginning of the third year for the other children, with the trilingual in an extra, two-child, parallel class.

Another child with Japanese parents who was a trilingual returnee with nearly perfect native speaker ability in English, and reading and writing ability far above all the rest, joined the first class at the beginning of its third year, when one of the original dominant bilinguals left. The returnee did not join the reading program as such and her case is not discussed here.

## Reading Scheme

Having the children read story books at home with their parents was the basis of the program. For this purpose the parents chose the most used British reading scheme, the Oxford Reading Tree. It has a core trunk of graded story book readers, and many branches to cater for most imaginable needs. It is a state-of-the-art reading scheme for native speaker children in Britain, where it is widely used in schools. The books have been imaginatively written and illustrated, so that children really enjoy them. The whole scheme is carefully designed according to the most accepted, modern reading theories based on recent reading research and successful teaching. It manages to be comprehensive and eclectic, from whole language to phonics, and it comes with manuals that clearly explain how to teach a child using the scheme.

## **Weekly class and Teacher**

The idea of the weekly class was basically to support this home reading program and to teach writing. It was meant to motivate the children and parents to keep on with the reading. The classes were only in English, with a native speaker teacher. During the first year a lot more guided reading was necessary, so all the children did the same story book and its workbook together at the same time. One of the parents, who was a professional teacher of English as a foreign language, taught the class. The next two years, when the author, also a professional teacher of English as a foreign language, taught, they read different books, usually at the same level, except the younger, balanced bilingual who could not keep up with the rest.

I had already had some years experience teaching monolingual children English as a foreign language. I had taught them the four skills, but definitely with the contemporary strong emphasis on speaking. Nevertheless, I did have some success teaching Japanese monolinguals to read and write English. I was used to fun but structured, fast-paced, shorter lessons. So, with this new challenge, I structured the hours in stages, and used all the different techniques and activities, such as games, that I could, to be effective and give variety. I tried to integrate the four skills, always arranging opportunities for them to speak and write after reading and listening input.

Generally, the first hour had a reading focus, the second speaking and listening, the third writing. What actually happened in the classes can be described as activities. For example, first, there was some fun activity to get them speaking and thinking in English. Then, the teacher checked on their reading progress individually by having them privately retell the story and asking them comprehension questions about the book they had read with their parents during the week, and by getting them to read selected parts of it. While the teacher gave individual attention like this, the other students usually went on with their workbooks, which closely reinforce each story book.

The next hour, after the ten minute snack (English was to be spoken all the time), the emphasis was on listening and speaking, usually as input for the last hour. Between the second and third hour there was a longer break in which we went outside to play in the park next door. Most classes were held in the same child's very suitable home.

The last hour usually concentrated on writing. Every week, each child went home with a book or more to read, plus some writing homework, at least their diary. From beginning to end we had three hours. Eventually we settled on Friday after school lunch as least disruptive of their school lessons, and in the hope of keeping them in English over the weekend. Trimesters were the same as school.

## **Why not a Saturday School**

Why did the parents take their children out of school half a day a week, instead of just starting a Saturday School? First, as a precondition, they expected the schools would accept it. Nowadays the Japanese Ministry of Education does consider special needs such as bilingualism important, so schools are meant to allow time off school for properly organized classes that cater to special needs. In fact, the school principals and teachers were very cooperative. Second, it would have been too much of an

additional burden on all members of the families, in particular the children themselves, who of course had the usual private music and sport lessons as well. This could have led to resentment toward English and learning to read it. Third, on the contrary, for the children it was both a bribe to study English and a reward for doing it. Fourth, importantly, it showed them how highly everybody, not only their parents but their school teachers too, valued their English.

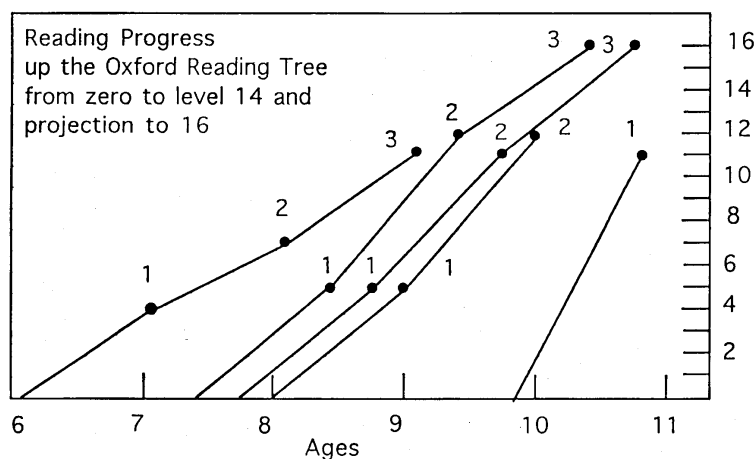
## Reading Progress

Using the Oxford Reading Tree in Britain with native speakers, these are the very approximate expectations of reading progress. On average, they can be expected to read stages I to 5 the first year, at about 5 to 6 years old, as beginners. Then, the second year, as emergent readers, they should be able to read stages 6 to 9, at about 6 to 7 years old. Next, as competent readers they are expected to be able to read 10 to 12, and then as fluent readers stages 12 to 14. Ages overlap because starting ages and individual progress varies.

They were reading the books in the Oxford Reading Tree at the levels indicated by the numbers up the vertical axis after one, two and three years of the program (1,2,3 inside the graph), at the ages along the horizontal axis. The Oxford Reading Tree has fourteen stages. They went beyond that, so I have projected two more stages.

According to expectations in Britain, my youngest student, the balanced bilingual progressed a little slower than average. The middle group of dominant bilinguals progressed more or less within expectations as late starters. More exactly, their first year was an average first year of learning to read for children in Britain starting younger, but their second year was above average. The very late starter, dominant bilingual was an exceptional case, with the effect of age very apparent.

In fact, the influence of age on reading progress is graphically dramatic. The older they started the faster they progressed, the younger the slower. The rate of progress of the child who started at six was two-thirds the rate of the students who started two school grades later than him, at seven and a



half, and only one third the rate of the child who started four grades later than him, at almost ten years old. So, the oldest learned to read in one year what it took the youngest three years to learn. In other words the oldest learned to read three times faster than the youngest.

The fact that the three and then two students who started in the same grade at school did not diverge much in their reading levels seems significant, too. They did not have to keep the same pace after the first year, and competition between them was not a factor. So, they could have diverged in the long term, but that did not happen. Instead my assessment at the time was that their learning curves kept crossing each other. In fact, in the last year, it constantly surprised me that either one could only temporarily get ahead of the other.

### **Reading Quality**

There is the question of the quality of their reading. The degree of comprehension at which different students were reading the books at different levels might have varied. However, the teacher and parents constantly checked for comprehension, with concept and comprehension questions for which the answers could not be just lifted out of the text. Also, the students set their own paces, which seemed to indicate that in the long term their comprehension levels were relatively normal. Because, we aimed, of course, to have them reading for pleasure, and could offer them extra books outside the core readers, when they did want to stay at the same level. The balanced bilingual was a native speaker comparison, and in no way did his comprehension seem to be in any way superior or different to theirs.

### **Reading Problems**

What exactly was holding the younger one back? Because, to start with, one might assume, and I suppose we did, that the youngest student would be able to keep up with the others. After all, he was a balanced bilingual, due to such things as having spent every summer vacation in England talking with his peers. His speaking and listening ability were indistinguishable from that of a native speaker. He brought with him a lot more schemes of English language and culture, such as having access to a big memory store of set phrases unfamiliar to the other children, and because he had personally experienced in England the environment and typical situations in the stories. So, in the flow of the narrative he could recognize more of his own experience and language.

In contrast, the others all had quite deficient listening and speaking ability. That was revealed in many ways, such as not being able to understand instructions that were no problem for him, and producing very few grammatically or pragmatically correct utterances. Also, their British cultural experience was very limited.

The most accepted theory is that reading needs to be interactive (Carrell, 1988, p. 239), an almost simultaneous interaction between many different processes, which can be broadly categorized as top-down or bottom-up. Presumably, all the children's reading was interactive in this sense.

However, miscue analysis (Goodman, 1975, p. 11) which is basically recording what kind of mis-

takes a learner makes when reading aloud and then analyzing them, consistently showed that the youngest, balanced bilingual child continued to overuse top-down strategies. His most common mistake was misprediction or over prediction. He would say a completely different sentence, phrase or word that would make sense in the context. If I suggested it was wrong, he would just look into space and make another plausible guess. In these cases he would not look at the text, unless I insisted. This was him over-playing the psycholinguistic guessing game a la Goodman. This is a common problem with readers whose bottom-up skills are limited (Eskey, Grabe, 1988, p. 226), for example, if their sight vocabulary is too small, or their phonic decoding is underdeveloped. His problem was slow development of bottom-up skills, such as phonic decoding and sight-word recognition. That was very obvious in the many word building and spelling games we played.

On the other hand, miscue analysis indicated that the dominant bilinguals relied on bottom-up processing. Their commonest misreadings were phonic and word recognition mistakes. They said nonsense words, which the balanced bilingual never said, because they made a small phonic decoding mistake and assumed that such a word existed. Or they mistook one word for another and said it, even if it could not meaningfully fit in the context. They did not misread whole phrases or sentences, like the balanced bilingual did.

A counter assumption could be made that as they were at a more advanced stage of mental development their reasoning and predictions about the story would be more sophisticated, more mature, that their top-down processing would be better. But, that was not indicated in discussions with them aimed at activating schemes relevant to the stories before they started reading them, nor in discussions with them about the stories after they had read them.

The most plausible conclusion is that the older dominant bilinguals learned to read faster and were at a higher level of reading, because they more quickly acquired bottom-up, phonic decoding and word recognition skills. They had to do that because they could not depend on top-down strategies the way the balanced bilingual could. However, the older, late-starter progressed so much faster that age seemed to be the critical factor. In fact, it seems reasonable to generalize from that to the hypothesis that bottom-up skill development depends on age.

### **Advantages of Age in Learning to Read**

There are more general explanations for the advantages of being older when learning to read, which could entail an explanation for the dependence on age of bottom-up skill development. First, however, consider the advantages of being younger when learning language. As well as better brute memory and phonological and syntactic flexibility, the younger you are the more affective advantage you seem to have. Affect, that is emotion and motivation structure, is increasingly accepted to be crucial for effective language learning (Brown, 1994, p. 61). However, remember that what is meant is learning to listen and speak not read and write. Because the same affective factors which help younger children acquire spoken language could work against their acquisition of written language. The affective advantages that can be summarized for general purposes as lack of restraint and complications at the individual psychological level, such as less language ego, or just less ego, which facilitate easier in-

tegration into the group and increase benefits from peer pressure and other group mediated learning, do not apply to reading, because it is a solitary activity, despite all pedagogical efforts to make it group oriented. To say that invites disagreement, when every human activity can be interpreted as social.

But, in fact, my students used reading to escape from group pressure, and conversely one of the problems in any children's reading class, and it was in this, is to get the more immature students to take their mind off group interaction and settle into reading. Actually, none of these children could really settle into sustained solitary reading in the classroom until they started the third grade at school. In this respect the youngest was the same.

Overall, these affective factors could be analyzed as due to differences in structures of motivation, especially motivational maturity, in practical terms, general study attitude. Children take time to learn how to manage their emotions and moods, and to realize that sometimes they need to force themselves to do what they might not want to do at the moment in order to achieve long term goals. In the case of reading, that means doing the hard part of learning to read, the non-magical part that does not come easy, acquiring bottom-up skills. They have to learn to sound out the words and they need to build up their sight word recognition.

### **No Improvement in Speaking**

For me, the major and shocking conclusion from this teaching experience is that learning to read does not necessarily or automatically have any effect on speaking ability, at least in the case of the weaker language of dominant bilinguals.

My observation and the parents', backed by early and late in the program tape recordings, was that their speaking did not improve. Some improvement in their speaking ability had been expected. After all, the three-hour lessons were conducted entirely in English and the native speaker teacher considered himself a modern, speaking-oriented instructor, always creating opportunities for the students to speak, and sensitively encouraging them to do so. It was a problem I struggled with the whole time. So, why did their speaking not improve?

### **Reasons for No Improvement in Speaking**

One reason was that the aim stated by their parents was to teach them to read and write. It may sound like an excuse, but pursuing that goal required a tremendously exhausting effort from the children and the teacher, and made me afraid to disturb the momentum that their reading progress did achieve.

Another reason, an admission of failure, is that I could not consistently find the right methods to teach speaking in the four-child class. Possibly, that was because of the class composition: a younger, virtual native speaker in the balanced bilingual, who was far behind the others in his reading and writing, with three older dominant bilinguals, who would try to escape into their reading and writing when they could not express themselves in speech. That was my first year teaching them. The next year, one of the dominant bilinguals left, to be replaced by a trilingual returnee with reading and writing

skills better than all of them, and listening and speaking ability like a native speaker, but in the school grade between the younger balanced bilingual and the two older bilinguals, of whom one was, do not forget, a trilingual. The group dynamics were not conducive to communicative practice.

On the other hand, with me using the same techniques, in the third year the dominant trilingual showed slight improvement in speaking ability in his extra, parallel, two-child class, with the late starting dominant bilingual, whose focus was reading and writing. It seemed to be because he was able to get enough practice in the right conditions of a non-threatening class with only one other child of the same age, sex and approximately the same speaking ability, but with much lower reading and writing skills. Suitable group conditions and a critical mass of practice seemed necessary.

Considering the conditions under which his speaking improved, and all the speech production problems I had to deal with in the group, such as the persistent difficulty of just getting them to say anything in the presence of others, and their utter aversion to drilling, I guess that the problem was self-esteem and inhibition (Ellis, 1994, p. 518) associated with the very fragile, special language egos of dominant bilinguals, and in particular, bicultural, dominant bilingual, older children.

As reasons for their lack of progress in speaking, despite their progress in reading, I have identified two course design level problems. First, learning to speak was not an explicit aim. Secondly, in any case, the very different speaking abilities, inverse to their ages, made some of the classmates incompatible for speaking lessons together. The third reason I have given, linked to the latter problem, is that dominant bilinguals have very fragile language egos, making them inhibited and defensive.

As a solution for any teacher or parent in a similar situation, I would advise a completely different module, lesson or teacher for speaking, deliberately not integrated with reading, and with careful selection of students for compatible language egos, which would require at least similar speaking ability.

## **Independence of Reading**

However, the above explanation does not go far enough, because there is a temptation for teachers and parents who want children to be literate to want and assume there to be some wonderful, interactive, synergistic symmetry between listening, speaking, reading and writing. Conceptualizing them as the four skills, the two receptive skills of listening and reading, and the two productive skills of speaking and writing, plus analogies with multimedia, add to the confusion. These are only pedagogical constructs or labels for use at some levels, such as planning a curriculum or stages in a lesson.

At a deeper level there is asymmetry among the four skills. They depend on and influence each other differently. The relationship between listening and speaking is not in question here. I have already claimed that learning to read did not affect the speaking ability of my students. We all know, too, of cases of competent readers of a foreign language who can say almost nothing in it. As counter evidence, there are also the students whose reading seems to have positively influenced their speaking. However, my experience of that is with higher intermediate or advanced level speaking students, and the connection is much vaguer than with these children.

Learning to read also had no effect on their writing. Even though they learned to understand texts with relatively complex grammar and vocabulary, they could not write what they could not say. In



self-processed writing, meaning unaided writing, they could only write out what they could think out, which was what they could speak. In other words, apart from learning the basic conventions of writing, that is spelling and punctuation, their writing, at the level of conveying meaning, did not improve, in spite of their progress in reading.

Listening might seem the most likely to be influenced by learning to read. Apart from very slowly, very slightly increasing their listening vocabulary indirectly through talking about key words in the stories, influence on their listening was not detected. Based on dictation and listening comprehension test results, I judged that their listening ability was not influenced by learning to read. Thus, in dictation they wrote like they spoke, not like they read. All the pronunciation and grammatical mistakes and uncertainties in their speech were in their writing of dictations. Of course, a counter argument is that what a learner writes in a dictation is not what they hear, just an indication of their writing ability in response to what they hear. But, if you slow down the dictation enough, and totally discount writing conventions, which also means allowing for differences, such as segmentation, between spoken and written forms, what the listener hears seems to be revealed in their writing. Similarly, from when they began to learn to write until the end of the program, the balanced bilingual's attempts at dictation were different from the dominant bilinguals'.

Despite all their genuine reading progress, if I ignored their improvement in writing conventions, their dictations did not improve, and the balanced bilingual, whose reading ability was far below theirs, always caught more of what I said, though his handwriting, spelling and punctuation were much worse. Not only their speaking ability, but also their listening and writing abilities were not positively affected by learning to read, nor by all the reading they did. In other words, listening, speaking and writing are dependent on each other, but reading can be independent. Why this is so, whether, for example, it is because readers soon read beyond the syntactic surface into the universal semantic world that all languages might be a particular version of, is beyond the scope of this paper.

## **Conclusion**

The reading progress of these children shows that local-language-dominant bilinguals who have deficient speaking and listening ability in their foreign parent's language can nevertheless learn to read it with the same level of comprehension and at a similar rate of progress as native-speaker children. It shows that age, not language ability can determine their rate of progress in learning to read. That seems to be because acquisition of bottom-up skills, which is the popular conception of learning to read, is easier the older the child gets. That, in turn, seems to be influenced by affective factors, summarized as motivational maturity. In fact, these dominant bilinguals can turn to advantage their dependence on bottom-up processing, and avoid the overdependence on prediction that can be a problem with native-speaker beginners and poor readers.

On the other hand, parents and teachers are warned that speaking, listening and writing abilities will not just automatically improve as a result of learning to read. In fact, reading can be a strangely independent skill that is not necessarily influenced by and does not necessarily influence speaking, listening or writing.

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