

Effects of Modification of Style on EFL Learners' reading comprehension

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Introduction

EFL learners face multi-fold, complex difficulty in reading texts written in English (Carell, 1984). Related factors are cognitive, linguistic and cultural. Naturally, vocabulary alone does not decide the levels of difficulty in reading comprehension. In this small-scale study, the facilitative effect of modification of rhetorical organization on reading comprehension of texts written in English was investigated.

The research question

Does modification of rhetorical organization have any effect on EFL learners reading comprehension if the other conditions, such as vocabulary or length of the texts stay the same? More specifically, does the contrast between Anglo-American linear style and a typically Japanese, *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* style have any effect upon the levels of reading comprehension of EFL learners?

Methods

Participants

In the study, two classes ($n=27$, and $n=31$) of pre-intermediate college EFL learners (TOEIC 380-420) were asked to receive a set of experimental treatments. It is a restriction if intact groups are used in a study but the whole study had to be conducted within the limited environment of a school this time; a larger scale with random pool of participants should be conducted later in order to generalize the result of this experiment.

Materials

The following manipulation was conducted in order to obtain two texts (one in Japanese organization, the other in Anglo-American) with equivalent contents and difficult vocabulary levels. The model of the text was taken from *Hagaki jitsuyou bunrei* (Goto 1992). The book is a collection of letters by a reputed Japanese business writer. Most of the sample letters represent the traditional Japanese *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* organization. The book lists ready-to-use samples of letters on various business occasions. A sample text stating dissatisfaction and informing of discontinuation of a contract was chosen. Business correspondence was chosen as it is supposed to be clear and explicit, and is supposed to follow the culturally acceptable organization and rhetoric.

Contents of the sample letter were itemized, e.g. what was requested, by whom, to whom, etc. The researcher and a Japanese bilingual college writing instructor conducted this procedure. Then a Canadian translator was asked to write a set of letters, one followed the order of Japanese original letter and the other was written in appropriate North-American business style. The translator has more than ten years of experience in translating Japanese business materials into English. The purpose of the translation was not initially explained to the translator. It was instructed to the translator that the both translations should reflect all the factors and vocabulary items of the itemized list. In this way Text A, in Japanese traditional rhetorical organization and Text B, in North-American business style were obtained. As shown in the Appendix, Text A is a direct word-to-word translation of the original Japanese text; in contrast, Text B represents a linear organization typical in Anglo-American organization.

Text A in Japanese organization builds up discussion step by step, in contrast, Text B, in linear organization, begins with a remark of the purpose/conclusion of the letter and uses other items as supporting evidence for the conclusion which is already stated. This contrast has long been discussed (Kobayashi, 1984, Hinds, 1987)

Procedure

Each group was given one text: Text A was given to Group A; Text B was given to Group B. The post-reading comprehension test contained ten multiple-choice questions. Afterwards, a week later, Group A was given text B; Group B was given Text A. Both groups were asked to write the delayed post-reading comprehension tests. Then they were interviewed.

Results

A simple *t*-test was conducted to compare the levels of comprehension. Although it was expected that the Group A, who read the Japanese rhetorical organization would do better, unexpectedly, Group B scored better ($p=0.05$) on both post- and delayed post-reading comprehension tests. However, interestingly enough, in the interviews, most of the participants (22 out of 27 in Group A, 26 out of 31 in B) replied that they preferred Text A, the Japanese style rather than Text B. This may contradict the levels of comprehension. It is interesting that most participants felt the Japanese style more polite than the Anglo-American style.

Discussion

As this is only a one-shot small-scale experiment, further research must be conducted to argue any conclusive statement. Although the issue of rhetorical style and comprehension has been discussed for a long time, still a lot has to be researched. In the result, it is intriguing that the preference of Text A was based on the polite-impolite issue. More of qualitative insight might illustrate the EFL reader's judgment of polite/impolite and appropriate/inappropriate decision.

References

- Carell, P. (1984). The effects of rhetorical organization on ESL readers. *Tesol Quarterly*, 18 (3).
- Got, K. (1992). *Suguni yakudatsu hagaki jitsuyou bunrei (Quick and useful models for postcard writing)*, Tokyo, Takahashi shoten.

Appendix

Text A

We ordered ZP-3 electric fans on the basis of a 20-day delivery period. For that, we paid extra charge for the express service. We placed our order with your company four weeks ago and have as yet received neither the merchandise nor any conclusive reason for the lack of delivery. I called your sales representative when the delivery period expired but received no conclusive explanation. You will understand that August is not the best time to sell this product. The optimum sales period for the merchandise has passed; we have no further need for the fans. As we are

unsatisfied with the service offered by your company, we are forced to terminate our purchase agreement. Therefore, I would like to cancel our order for ZP-3 electric fans.

Text B

I would like to cancel our order for ZP-3 electric fans. We placed our order with your company four weeks ago and have as yet received neither the merchandise nor any conclusive reason for the lack of delivery. We ordered the fans on the basis of a 20-day delivery period, and we paid the extra charge for the express service. I called your sales representative when the delivery period expired but received no conclusive explanation. The optimum sales period for the merchandise has passed. We have no further need for the fans. You will understand that August is not the best time to sell this product. Therefore, as we are unsatisfied with the service offered by your company, we are forced to terminate our purchase agreement.