# TEACHING OF FOUNDATIONS FOR READING COMPREHENSION OF ENGLISH

By

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# 英文読解力の基礎指導

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**0.** There are many important points in the teaching of reading comprehension of English as a foreign language. The student has to learn the graphic symbols, the structural devices, the vocabulary etc. All of them are quite unfamiliar and strange to the student whose native language is Japanese because English and Japanese are linguistically so different from each other that the two languages have very few points in common. Reading ability, however, is said to be a general power[1]: the ability to read Japanese is transferred to the ability to read English. In this sense, so far as reading comprehension is concerned, teachers of English and teachers of Japanese bear an equal share of responsibility. In this article, however, everything will be discussed from the standpoint of English teachers.

**1.** In Japan, as well as in many other countries, how to translate English into the native language is a great concern for improvement in the reading ability: teachers and students are inclined to regard the ability to read as the ability to translate, and *vice versa*. The ability to translate is based upon the ability to read, it is true, but the converse is not true. Besides the translation practice in the classroom lesson will often be the work in which the student seeks word equivalents in his native language and arranges them in proper order. It is nothing but a literal translation far from the true sense of the word[2]. For such readers, English sentences are cryptograms, and bilin-

1. For example:
   Reading ability is a general power. It is not confined to one language: for improvement in the ability to read one language is "transferred," and shows itself in improvement of the reading of another language. M. West: *Learning to Read a Foreign Language* p. 7
2. As to translation, Fries says as follows:
   Translation is really a difficult task —— that is, the translation that attempts to grasp thoroughly the essentials of the meaning expressed in one language and then render these essentials in another language in such a way that speakers of the second language may fully understand, may relate that meaning to their experience without distortion. Such translation is an exercise well worth while but it can be accomplished only by those whose control of the languages to be used and whose power of expression are of a very high order. Many fluent speakers of a foreign language fail miserably when they attempt translation. C. C. Fries: *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* p. 6 footnote

gual dictionaries are code-books. The ability to read English or any other foreign languages can never be improved through such translation on a low level[3]. Then, what should teachers of English do for their students' improvement of reading comprehension?

2. Although reading ability is intrinsically a general power and is transferred from one language to another, if we go into particulars, learning to read a foreign language is quite different from learning to read one's native language. Small children who are going to learn to read their native language already know the language ; they can speak it and understand it when it is spoken ; they have already mastered the sound system and the features of arrangement that constitute the structure of the language. Moreover, in their daily life, they have already become quite familiar with the graphic symbols though they cannot yet read them. Therefore at the first stage they have only to learn graphic equivalents for the sound signals. They do not have to learn the language itself. On the other hand, any adult who is going to learn to read a foreign language has to learn not only the graphic symbols but also the sound system and the structural devices, that is, the language itself. If the graphic symbols and the structural devices used in the target foreign language are similar to those used in one's native language, reading will be an easy practice. Japanese students, however, who are going to learn to read English have many difficulties because all the devices used in English are very different from those used in Japanese. They have to learn the graphic symbols equivalent to the sounds which they have learned or are learning with much difficulty. *Kana* letters used in Japanese are syllabic symbols, that is, though there are a few exceptions, one *kana* letter usually represents one sound unit and *vice versa*. But in English the same symbol often represents several different sounds and *vice versa*[4]. While the student has to overcome such difficulty in the graphic system, he also has to learn the structural devices. Moreover in order to learn the structural devices, it will inevitably become necessary for the student to know the vocabulary.

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3. See, for example, the view expressed in *ibid.* p. 6 :

Such a reader (*i. e.* a reader whose process of reading is a process of seeking word equivalents in his own native language) never enters into the precise particular way the foreign language grasps experience ; he is still using as a means of grasping meaning or understanding only the processes and vocabulary of his own language with the added difficulty of *seeing* a different set of symbols on the printed page which must act as clues from which he must guess the correct words of his own language to be substituted in order to make some kind of sense. He never really enters into the "thought" (the full meaning) expressed by the foreign language.

4. For example, see the following statement :

An alphabetic system of representing or spelling the "sounds" of a language is good in so far as it is "phonemic" —— that is, in so far as there is one distinct graphic symbol for each of the distinctive sound units of the language. Some languages like Finnish are from this point of view excellently spelled. Spanish is well spelled. English, however, is very badly spelled. In English the same symbol or letter stands for a number of distinctly different sounds as, for example, the letter *i* in *bite, bit, machine,* or the letters *ea* in *beat, breath, heart, earth.* On the other hand, the same sound is represented by a variety of symbols ; e. g., the vowel sound in *sweet* is represented by *ea* in *beat, e* in *mete, i* in *machine* and *caprice, eo* in *people, ie* in *believe, ei* in *receive. Ibid.* p. 11

Although the vocabulary need not be a large one, it requires great efforts to master strange foreign words. Before entering into true reading of English——such reading as to lead us into the experience of life through the English language itself, the student has to arrange all the preliminaries——the preliminaries which include mastering the sound system, the graphic symbols, and the basic sentence structures[5].

**3.** When we read and understand the written language, acoustic images inevitably intervene between the graphic symbols and the conceptions formed by them. Unless we know the sounds represented by the graphic symbols, we can hardly form any conceptions. Even in silent reading we reach understanding through the acoustic images caused by the written language. Therefore even if our final aim is reading comprehension, oral practice plays an important and indispensable part of the preliminaries[6]. When we teach English as a foreign language to adult students (in Japan the students who begin to learn English are usually twelve years old), we should begin the teaching with oral practice though, if the other practices such as reading and writing are excluded, it will not be effective because the students are too old to be contented with simple and childish oral repetition, and because the structures and the vocabulary learned through oral practice will never be fixed definitely without the support of reading and writing practice[7]. In this article I have no intention to discuss

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5. For example :
   Reading to learn about the people who speak English, and to enter into their experience of life through their literature is good ; but before such reading can be done successfully *the pupil must have achieved a control of the basic language signals* and *he must have learned to read the foreign language.* C. C. Fries : *Foundations for English Teaching* p. 377
6. Fries emphasizes this view in his *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* p. 6 :
   No matter if the final result desired is only to *read* the foreign language the mastery of the fundamentals of the language —— the structure and the sound system with a limited vocabulary —— must be through speech. The speech *is* the language. The written record is but a secondary representation of the language. To "master" a language it is not necessary to read it, but it is extremely doubtful whether one can really *read* the language without first mastering it orally.

   The same view is seen in his *Foundations for English Teaching* pp. 375—376.
   Some have attempted to teach a foreign language by means of reading —— by using reading as the only or the basic tool of learning. Most frequently such reading has been accompanied by grammar drills and translation into the native language of the learner... This practice has not been successful. The evidence seems to be overwhelming for the conclusion that whatever the ultimate aim in the teaching of a foreign language —— whether limited to reading or to translation —— the most efficient procedure for the first stage of that teaching is the "Oral Approach"... Only when the language signals are so mastered can satisfactory independent reading be done by the learner.
7. See the following statement :
   Reading can be used to support and supplement oral procedures. In the approach used here (*i. e.* the Oral Approach) it is assumed that most of the class-room activities will consist of oral teacher-pupil dialogs to introduce the new structures and vocabulary, oral pattern-practice to gain thorough control over the oral production of the separate patterns ... Reading and writing exercises, that also use exactly these same structures and vocabulary, can help the pupil to achieve the thorough learning that is the goal of all his oral practice. C. C. Fries : *Foundations for English Teaching* p. 375

various techniques used in oral practice. For discussion in detail, see C. C. Fries: *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language*, and *On the Oral Approach*. It is enough here to state that oral practice is an indispensable factor for reading comprehension and that, in teaching adult students, reading and writing practice should be done in parallel with oral practice, that is, they are complementary to one another.

**4.** Most parents teach their children the names of the letters before they are educated in any institute. In Japanese the names of the *kana* letters represent the sounds as has been mentioned in 2. In such a case, learning the names of the letters is concerned directly with learning to read the written language. In the case of English, however, the names of the letters are quite different from the sounds they represent. The word *desk* is not pronounced [di: i: es kei], nor is *pen* pronounced [pi: i: en]. To identify each letter by name contributes very little to reading. Thus, as Fries says, "Many teachers have come to believe that all teaching of the alphabet before the child begins to read is not only unnecessary but even harmful practice[8]." This is the case with the children who begin to learn to read English as their native language. In teaching English to Japanese students, the circumstances are different. Learning the letters of the alphabet by name has conventional purposes. We have to teach our students how to write as well as how to read. Unless they know the names of the letters, it is very inconvenient for us to explain how to spell words, and later on it will become almost impossible for them to use dictionaries. Fries says that the beginner if he is a native speaker of English does not need to have a recognition control of the entire alphabet and that the letters of high frequency such as A, T, H, M, F, C, S, B, R, P, D, and N should be taught first[9]. But in teaching the adult student learning English as a foreign language, the number of the graphic shapes to be learned need not be limited. In fact it is not supposed to be a difficult task even for the beginners to identify all the letters of the alphabet by name and shape because they have become very familiar with many of the letters in their daily life though the alphabet has twenty-six capital letters and as many small letters. What matters is quick recognition of the graphic symbols in contrast with one another. Such small letters as b, d, p, and q are very similar to one another in shape, and the beginner often takes one for another. Indeed these letter shapes should be learned in isolation at the first stage, but what is more important and useful for reading is to learn them in sequences, that is, to learn to recognize words with their meanings at a glance. Flash-cards or filmstrips are very useful for this practice. The student is shown the flash-cards or the filmstrips for a limited time and is asked to recognize the meanings. This initial practice is also useful for extensive reading in which the student must be trained later on.

**5.** The most important matter of all the preliminaries to reading is to learn the basic structural devices. To define the basic structural devices is linguistically very difficult. Transformationalists usually classify sentences into two kinds: kernel sentences and transforms. Kernel sentences are basic and transforms are built from kernel sentences

8. C. C. Fries: *Linguistics and Reading* p. 124
9. In detail, see *ibid.* pp. 126—127.

through grammatical transformations[10]. Here we regard the basic structural devices as a set of comparatively simple rules by which the words are arranged or put together properly. The set of rules can be called grammar. But what we have to pay attention to is that the grammar which is going to be discussed here is different from what we call traditional grammar or school grammar. Such grammar has often meant paradigms for the various declensions and conjugations, diagraming sentences, logical definitions of the parts of speech, and many rules by which the correctness of sentences is measured. The grammar discussed here means the natural devices by which small children learn their native language[11]. This kind of grammar is sure to help the student not only with the production but also with the recognition of the language.

**6.** To understand the full meaning of a sentence, we have to recognize three different kinds of meaning. They are (1) lexical meanings, (2) positional meanings, and (3) grammatical or functional meanings. The lexical meanings are far less important in the development of reading ability than the others because we cannot understand the meaning of a sentence even if we know all the words used in the sentence. For example, in the sentence *The man killed the bear*, if one knows only the lexical meanings of the words and does not know the positional and functional meanings, one cannot decide which is the performer, which is the receiver of the action, and the time of the occurrence of the action. On the other hand, even though one does not know the lexical meanings of the words, if only one knows the positional and functional meanings, one can understand that something called the *man* did some action toward something called the *bear* in the past. One only has to consult a dictionary to know the lexical meaning of each word. Almost all people including teachers and students usually regard the mastery of the vocabulary as the most important matter whenever they think of learning a foreign language. This common reaction is so deep-rooted among us that it is a difficult task to remove it from our general conceptions. But those engaged in language teaching must recognize the above-mentioned fact and bear it in mind that the initial emphasis should be put upon the thorough mastery of the structural devices.

**7.** In the Japanese language predicate verbs always come at the end of a sentence. This is one of the trouble spots for the Japanese student beginning to learn English. But this kind of trouble is comparatively easy to overcome because in a very simple sentence with few modifiers the student can easily point out the predicate verb as well as the NP's used as the subject, the object, or the complement though he does not know

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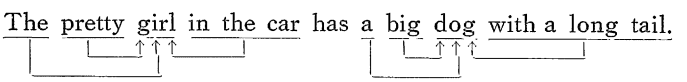
10. Chomsky gives a definition to kernel sentences in his *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* pp. 17—18.

    Since the base generates only a restricted set of base Phrase-markers, most sentences will have a sequence of such objects as an underlying basis. Among the sentences with a single base Phrase-marker as basis, we can delimit a proper subset called "kernel sentences." These are sentences of a particularly simple sort that involve a minimum of transformational apparatus in their generation.

11. In detail, see C. C. Fries: *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* pp. 27—28

such grammatical terms. What makes sentences complicated is modification. The student is often taught to find the sentence elements by excluding the modifiers through diagraming sentences. For example, when we teach the structure of the sentence *The pretty girl in the car has a big dog with a long tail*, we diagram the sentence as follows :




with the explanation as :

(1) *Girl* is the subject, *has* is the predicate verb, and *dog* is the object of the verb. The sentence pattern is S+V+O. The other words and phases are modifiers.

(2) *The*, *pretty*, and *in the car* are adjective modifiers, which modify the subject *girl*.

(3) *A*, *big*, and *with a long tail* are also adjective modifiers, which modify the object *dog*.

This way of analysis and explanation, which may be useful for linguistic analyses, is not natural in teaching languages because children learning their native language first learn to use very simple sentences with few modifiers, and then gradually learn to add various modifiers to the sentence elements. Practices and explanations by the technique called expansion are more natural and effective to teach the student complicated structures. The teacher first shows a sentence from which most of the modifiers have been eliminated, and, by adding each modifier one by one to the sentence, shows how the complicated sentence is generated.

The girl has a dog.
The *pretty* girl has a dog.
The pretty girl *in the car* has a dog.
The pretty girl in the car has a *big* dog.
The pretty girl in the car has a big dog *with a long tail.*

The expansion drill, which is also called the pyramid drill, can also start out with a single word instead of a sentence. In either case the modifiers should not be added more than one at a time in order to prevent the student from getting confused. Archibald A. Hill gives a typical pyramid as an example starting out with a single word[12].

John
Old John
Little old John
Poor little old John
Poor little old John ate
Poor little old John ate pie
Poor little old John ate apple pie
Poor little old John ate apple pie greedily

12. A. A. Hill : *Recent Linguistics and the Teaching of English* in *Applied Linguistics and the Teaching of English* edited by T. Yambe p. 175.

It is supposed to be much easier for the beginner to expand a simple sentence or a single word by adding modifiers than to analyze a complicated one. The modifiers by adding which the student expand a sentence should be at first single words such as adjectives and adverbs, and at the advanced stage they ought to be phrases and clauses. Clauses as modifiers are discussed in 9.

8. Japanese students feel much difficulty in understanding the relation between the modifers and the words to be modified when the modifiers are in the post-position. Drills in the function words, especially in prepositions, are effective in getting over the difficulty. At the beginning stage, drills must be begun not with complete sentences but with small sense units such as *the book on the desk*, *the doll in the box*, etc. Next the student is asked to embed the sense units in the sentence structures which he has already learned. The nine prepositions, *at*, *by*, *for*, *from*, *in*, *of*, *on*, *to*, and *with*, are especially important because they account for 92% of the occurrences of prepositions in Modern English[13]. In order to drill in the prepositions and other function words, what is called the word method can be effectively applied though the method is not a method by which function words are taught but a method used in teaching content words. Some textbooks using this method give exercises in which pictures for content words are inserted in sentences. See, for example, the next page. [14]
This kind of exercise has an advantage helping the student concentrate on the function words as the other graphic symbols, which are replaced by the pictures, do not disturb him.

9. Any one sentence structure of English is not supposed to be intricate. The structural devices are simple enough for small children to learn as their native language. But in reality, English, like every other natural language, is so complicated that the student learning it as a foreign language feels much trouble in understanding the full meaning. Intricacy in sentence structures is caused by repetition of simple structures. To be exact, one structure can contain or modify another structure. Transformationalists

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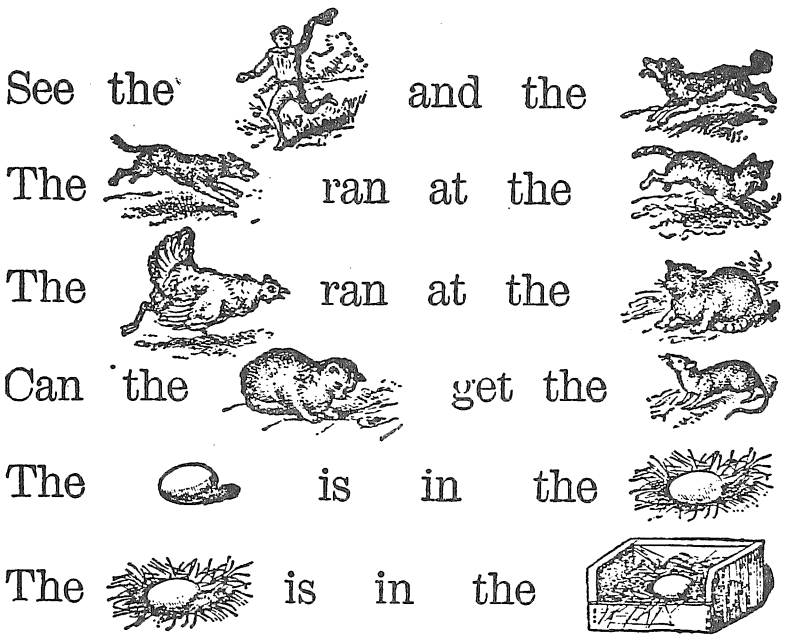
13. Nine of these function words (*i. e.* the nine prepositions) with substantives occur very frequently ; in fact, 92.6 per cent of the instances in the Standard English materials have the following nine words :

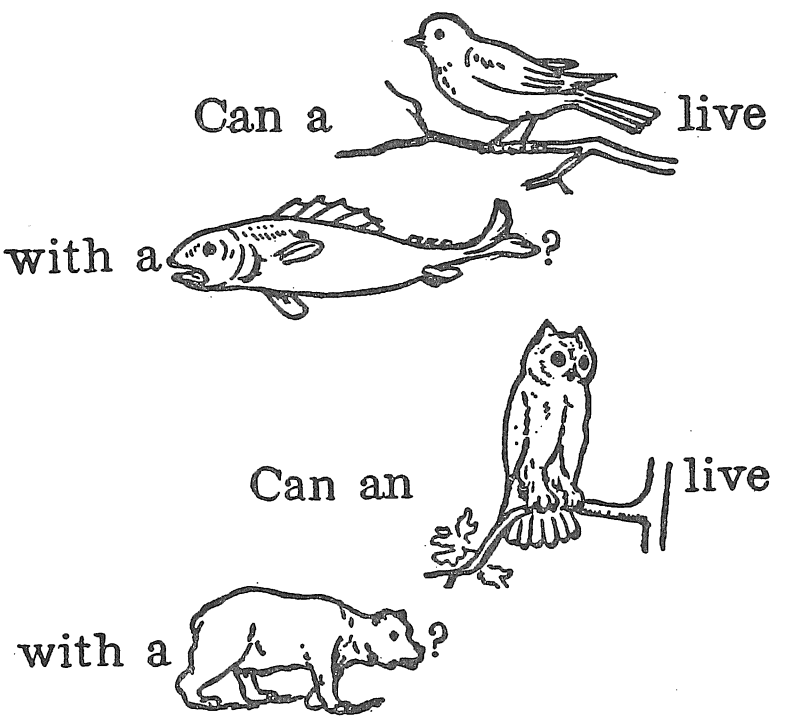
| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| at | ..... | 229 | instances |
| by | ..... | 128 | // |
| for | ..... | 333 | // |
| from | ..... | 216 | // |
| in | ..... | 573 | // |
| of | ..... | 906 | // |
| on | ..... | 228 | // |
| to | ..... | 428 | // |
| with | ..... | 164 | // |
| Total | ..... | 3,205 | // out of 3,448 or 92.6% |

C, C, Fries : *American English Grammar* p. 112

14. Reprinted from C. C. Fries : *Linguistics and Reading* pp. 12—13




SOURCE: Barnes, *New National First Reader,* New York, Chicago: A. S. Barnes & Company, 1883, p. 13.




SOURCE: Pollard, *Synthetic First Reader,* 1889, p. 23.

add a property called recursiveness to the grammar in order to explain the infinite variety of the language. We have no constraints, except those of style, on the number of times the recursive devices may be applied to a particular sentence though they are optional. For example, suppose we have the following string :

(1) the + boy + wants + to + catch + the + mouse (+ S)

Now if we replace the optional S with a constituent sentence such as :

(2) the + mouse + ate + the + cheese

the string (1) will be

(3) the + boy + wants + to + catch + the + mouse + that + ate + the + cheese

The string (3) can have an optional S again. If we add the optional S to the NP, *the cheese*, and replace it with another sentence such as :

(4) he + had + bought + the + cheese + at + the + store

we will get

(5) the + boy + wants + to + catch + the + mouse + that + ate + the + cheese + that + he + had + bought + at + the + store

By applying the recursive devices repeatedly, we can lengthen the sentence infinitely. For example :

(6) The boy wants to catch the mouse that ate the cheese that he had bought at the store *where his uncle works.*

(7) The boy *who lives next dook to us* wants to catch the mouse that ate the cheese that he had bought at the store where his uncle works.

Intricate structures as well as basic ones ought to be taught or learned by the expansion drill, which has been mentioned in 7. Experience has taught us that, among the constructions containing recursive S's or other modifiers, the left-branching construction[15] is very difficult for the Japanese student. The reason may be that, in the construction, the distance between the subject and the predicate verb is comparatively long.

(a) **This is** the cat that caught the rat that stole the cheese that was on the table in

15. A left-branching construction has the form [[[…]…]…]. For example :
[[[The cat that caught the rat] that stole the cheese] is this.]
A right-branching construction has the opposite property. For example :
[This is [the cat that caught [the rat that stole the cheese.]]]
In detail, see Chomsky : *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* p. 10ff.

the kitchen. (Right-branching construction)

(b) The cat that caught the rat that stole the cheese that was on the table in the kitchen is this. (Left-branching construction)

When we compare the two sentences above, (a) is much easier for the Japanese student than (b). Therefore more emphasis should be put upon the left-branching construction.

**10.** In teaching complicated sentences, we are apt to analyze them into the sentence elements (*i. e.* the subject, the predicate verb, the object, and the complement) and modifiers, or into immediate constituents. Such a way of teaching gives the student only superficial understanding. If one's process of reading is a process of analyzing sentences, one cannot really read the language. The expansion drill is less used at senior high schools than at junior high schools in Japan. But the more intricate the sentences to be learned become, the more frequently the expansion technique should be used. It has much value for the cultivation of the foundations for reading comprehension.

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