

The Influence of Learning Strategies in Senior High School Days on English Level of Japanese University Students

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Abstract

This study investigates how learning strategies influence English achievement level of Japanese university students. There are two purposes of this study. One is to examine how Japanese university students study English in their senior high school days. The typical English class styles of senior high schools in Japan, in addition to students' individual learning strategies, were researched by questionnaires. The other purpose is to investigate the relation between students' learning strategies and their English levels in terms of listening comprehension, reading comprehension, vocabulary size and grammar. The subjects of this study were freshmen of a national university in Japan and their English level is intermediate.

Japanese university students are said to have good knowledge of English especially that of grammar and vocabulary because of the effect of traditional methods for teaching English in their high school days and of the influence of preparation for university entrance examinations. However, there is severe criticism that Japanese students cannot communicate in English well even after they become university students. It is often said that this is also the result of their learning strategies of senior high school days. Based on the findings, effective methods for teaching and learning English in classroom situations both of senior high schools and universities in Japan are to be considered.

1. Introduction

Ad Hoc Council on Education, which was founded in 1984 by the prime minister of Japan, criticized English education in Japan severely. It reported that foreign language education, especially English education, was very ineffective though quite a long time had been spent on study of English at school and suggested that the education system should be changed.

One of the reasons of this inefficiency is said to be English class styles of junior and senior high schools which put too much emphasis on study of grammar and translation practice from English into Japanese. Since the current Course of Study for lower and upper secondary school, the main objective of which is to develop students' communication ability, was introduced, secondary school English education has been supposed to change from grammar and translation focused method to communicative language teaching, but the situation has not improved yet. According to Tanabe (2003), however, universities should be blamed for the infamous English education in Japan because attitude of universities have influenced the whole education of secondary schools in the country. Since some university entrance examinations still test just the knowledge of English, not communication ability, many English teachers think they do not have to change their class styles that

meet the need of university entrance examinations. As a result of preparing only for examinations, university students have good knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, and they continue their learning styles of senior high school days even after they become university students. It is crucial for university English teachers to know their students' leaning strategies and the way they studied English in their senior high school days.

There is another problem on English education at university level. The decline in English ability of students is one of the debated social issues in a decade and national and private universities all over Japan have been tackling this problem by changing their curriculums or teaching materials. Decline both in university students' attitude toward learning English and in their English ability can be thought to be an important problem that should be solved (Takefuta and Suiko, 2005). Without having data of the students' English proficiency level and their learning strategies, English teachers will face difficulties in handling their English classes at university.

2. Purposes of the Study

There are two main purposes for this study: one is a practical one for class management and the other is a research on the influence of English class styles and individual learning strategies on English ability. The first purpose is to examine how Japanese university students study English in their senior high school days and to measure their English abilities in specific language skills: vocabulary size, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and grammar. These data can be used to design course syllabuses of university English classes and to make teaching plans for daily classes. The second purpose is to investigate how English class styles or individual learning strategies influence students' English level. The previous data were used to analyze the relation.

3. Subjects

The subjects in the research are eighty four Japanese university students. All of them are freshmen of a national university and they were in three different English classes in a liberal arts course. Students of the university were divided into five levels based on the scores of a placement test which they took at the beginning of academic year. All the subjects were in level three or four, which means their English level is intermediate or advanced-intermediate. They are students of Faculty of Education (forty students), Faculty of Humanities (twenty two), Faculty of Agriculture (seventeen), Faculty of Engineering (three) and Faculty of Science (two). They meet twice a week in class and each class lasts ninety minutes.

4. Procedure

4.1 Questionnaires

Questionnaires were conducted at the beginning of each course concerning English class styles which the subjects experienced at senior high school days and their individual leaning strategies

using multiple choice questions. The following is the list of questions and choices for each category.

English class styles:

- (1) Experience of English classes conducted in English.
 - a. none
 - b. only in Oral Communication classes
 - c. in some other English subjects

- (2) How translation from English into Japanese was used in English classes?
 - a. all of the text
 - b. most of the text
 - c. about half of the text
 - d. only some parts of the text
 - e. comprehend the text in English

Individual learning strategies:

- (1) Where did you study English when you were a senior high school student?
 - a. high school and preparatory school (attended after school on weekdays)
 - b. high school and preparatory school (attended during holidays)
 - c. high school and English conversation school
 - d. high school only

- (2) Frequency of translating text from English into Japanese while reading English.
 - a. always / b. often / c. sometimes / d. rarely / e. never

- (3) Frequency of studying grammar textbook
 - a. always / b. often / c. sometimes / d. rarely / e. never

- (4) Frequency of practicing reading aloud English textbooks
 - a. always / b. often / c. sometimes / d. rarely / e. never

- (5) Memorizing new words in context
 - a. always / b. often / c. sometimes / d. rarely / e. never

4.2 Vocabulary Size Test

Vocabulary size of each subject was estimated from the written test which was made based on

JACET List of 8000 Basic Words (JACET 8000). The test was also conducted at the beginning of each course. It includes one hundred words: twenty words were randomly chosen from each level (1–1000, 1001–2000, 2001–3000, 3001–4000, 4001–5000). The subjects were supposed to choose an equivalent English word to each Japanese word among five choices. Only the size of their passive vocabulary was checked in the test. Estimated vocabulary size of each subject was calculated based on the scores of each level.

4.3 Listening Comprehension Test

A computer based listening comprehension test was used to measure listening ability of each subject. The test is one part of the placement test of ALC NetAcademy (web based e-learning system) and each subject took the test in a CALL room. The test is a computer adaptive test and the questions change depending on the percentage of questions answered correctly. The results were shown with five levels: Advanced, Intermediate-Plus, Intermediate, Novice-Plus and Novice.

4.4 Reading Comprehension Test

The score of reading comprehension section in Cambridge Objective Placement Test, which was conducted before starting classes to place the students in five levels, was used to measure the reading ability of each subject. The test has eight English passages and twenty multiple-choice questions with four possible answers. All the questions concern the content of each passage.

4.5 Grammar Test

The score of language use section of Cambridge Objective Placement Test was used to measure the ability of English grammar of each subject. The section has thirty multiple choice questions with four possible answers.

5. Results

5.1 English Class Style

Figure 1 shows that most of the senior high school English classes are conducted in Japanese. Since the Course of Study required all senior high school students to take at least one of the Oral Communication subjects A, B or C, which focus speaking and listening comprehension skills, all the subjects are supposed to experience English classes instructed in the target language at least twice a week in one of three years. However, the fact is that more than half of Oral Communication classes were instructed in Japanese. According to this fact, it is difficult to deny that some senior high schools teach English grammar in Japanese in Oral Communication classes because it is also hard to teach students speaking and listening skills without using the target language. As far as four skill integrated subjects such as English and are concerned, only two subjects out of eighty four experienced English instructed lessons.

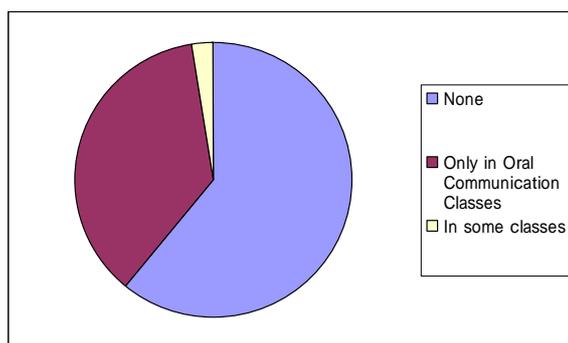


Figure 1: Experience of English Classes Conducted in English

It can be said that grammar-translation method is still the main stream of senior high school English classes (Figure 2). Since translating all or most of the sentences in the textbooks from English into Japanese is the main activity in English classes, the instruction of important reading strategies such as scanning or skimming can be new things for most university students.

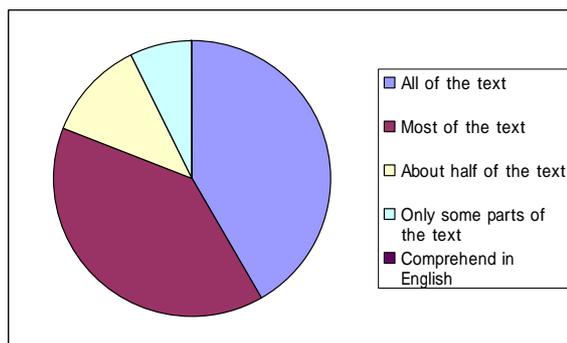


Figure 2: How Translation from English into Japanese were Used in English Classes

5.2 Individual Learning Strategies

When it comes to the role of senior high school for English study, about half of the subjects studied English only at their senior high school, while the other half had chances of studying at a preparatory school for entrance examination besides studying at senior high school (Figure 3). It means that English classes at school still play a crucial role in learning English and they have big influence on students' learning strategies.

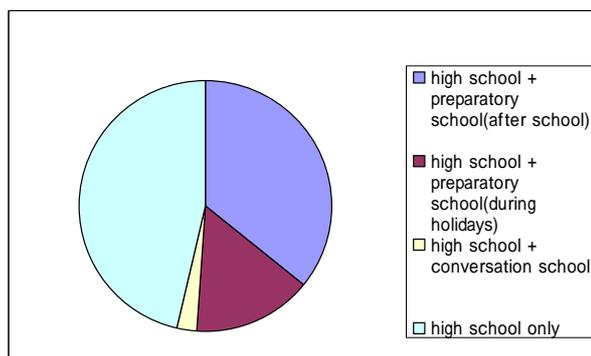


Figure 3: Schools Where Subjects Studied English

Though, in most English classes at senior high schools, students translated English sentences into Japanese as mentioned above, Figure 4 shows that individual students do not depend on translation so much when they read English passages. They learned reading strategies by themselves to read faster in order to cope with university entrance examinations which have some long passages to read in a limited time.

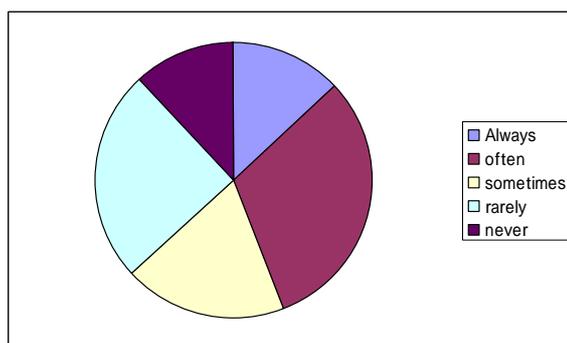


Figure 4: Frequency of Translating English into Japanese while Reading English

While senior high school students are said to put too much emphasis on study of English grammar, the subjects did not spend much time on it (Figure 5). This might be one of the reasons why many university students lack accuracy in producing English especially in writing English composition.

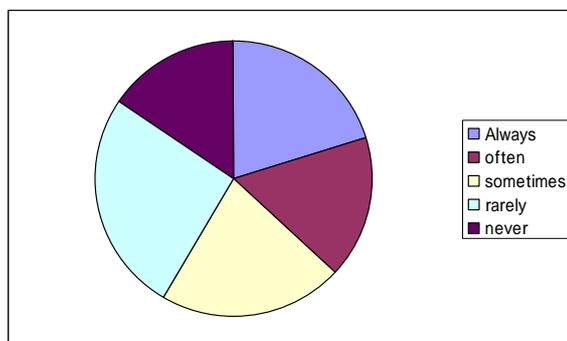


Figure 5: Frequency of Studying Grammar Textbooks

Reading aloud practice is one of the best methods to acquire the basic knowledge of phonology, syntax and vocabulary (Tsuchiya, 2004), however, less than twenty percent of the subjects practiced reading aloud their textbooks on a daily basis and one third of them never read aloud English passages at home in their senior high school days. It can be possible to say that the situation has much to do with the low level of their speaking ability.

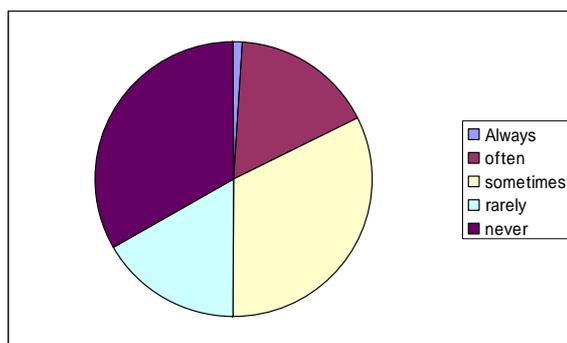


Figure 6: Frequency of Practicing Reading Aloud English Textbooks

As for vocabulary learning strategies, Figure 7 indicates that the subjects preferred memorizing isolated lexical items to learning new words from context. Oral interview was conducted about vocabulary learning strategies and most of the subjects said that they used some published word books which had lists of English words with Japanese translation to memorize and check words so as to prepare for entrance examinations.

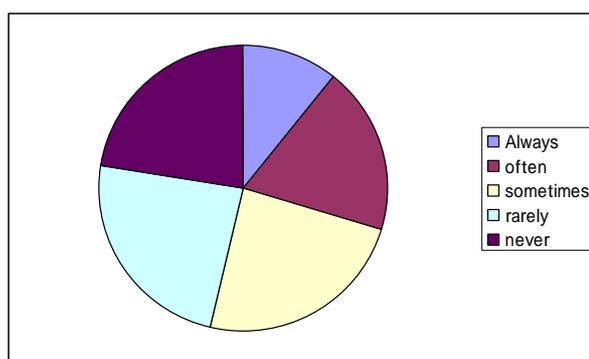


Figure 7: Memorizing New Words in Context

5.3 Estimated Vocabulary Size

Figure 8 shows that the estimated vocabulary sizes of all the subjects were over two thousand five hundred. According to the Course of Study for junior and senior high school, Japanese junior high school students are supposed to study nine hundred words and senior high school students should cover another four hundred words after studying required subject English. If they study some other additional subjects such as English or Reading, the total number of words reaches

two thousand two hundred. Since all the subjects succeeded in passing the entrance examination, it is natural that they had larger vocabulary than the number of the words that appeared in the textbooks.

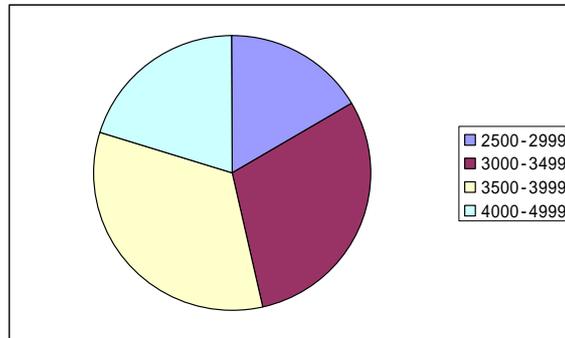


Figure 8: Estimated Vocabulary Size

5.4 Listening Comprehension

As is shown in Figure 9, more than half of the subjects were labeled “Intermediate,” which means that the students are able to understand daily topics. No one was in the category of “Novice.” All the subjects had certain level of listening comprehension.

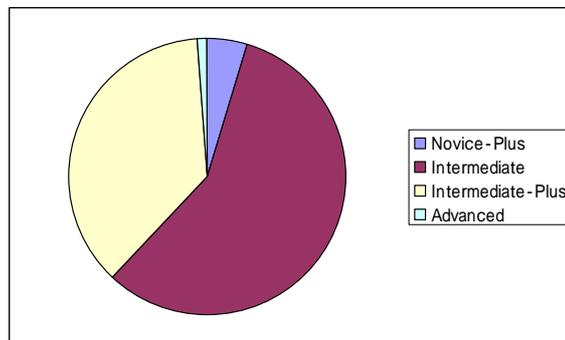


Figure 9: Level of Listening Comprehension

5.5 Reading Comprehension

Though some subjects were not good at reading, about three fourth of them got seventy percent of the total score (Figure 10).

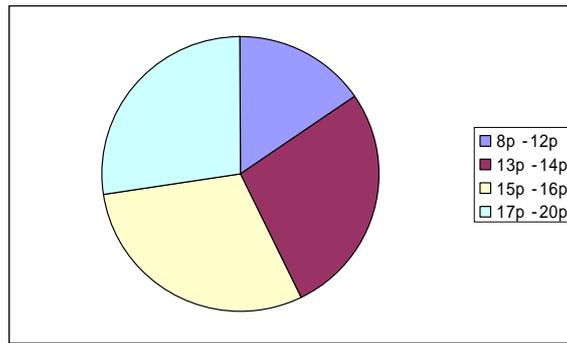


Figure 10: Score of Reading Comprehension

5.6 Grammar

Figure 11 indicates that there were many students who had good knowledge of English grammar. When the subjects were in senior high school, they practiced solving grammar questions as preparation for university entrance examinations.

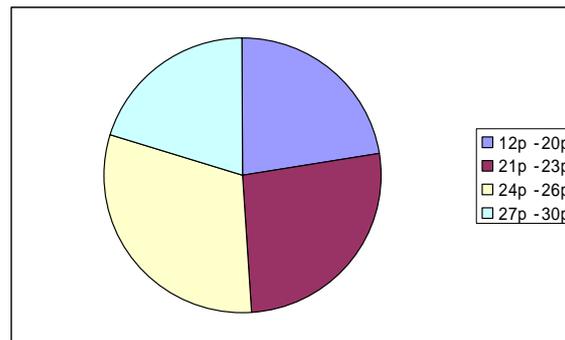


Figure 11: Score of Grammar

6 Discussion

6.1 The Influence of Class Styles

Figure 12 and 13 show the influence of class styles in senior high school days on English level in terms of vocabulary size and listening comprehension of the subjects as university students. As mentioned in 5.1, some of the subjects had English instructed classes only in Oral Communication classes, and this experience did not have positive influence both on vocabulary size and listening comprehension. This is because, in most senior high schools, students studied one of Oral Communication classes once or twice a week in one specific year, and it was impossible for them to have enough English exposure in such a small amount of time. On the contrary, the subjects who experienced English instructed lessons in some other classes were in the categories of large vocabulary size. As for listening comprehension, all the Novice-Plus students did not have any experience of taking English classes conducted in English.

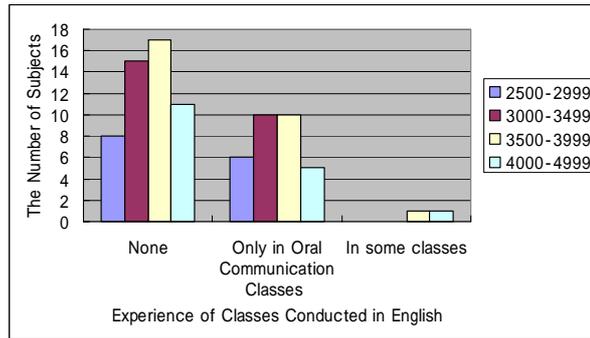


Figure 12: Classes Conducted in English -Vocabulary Size

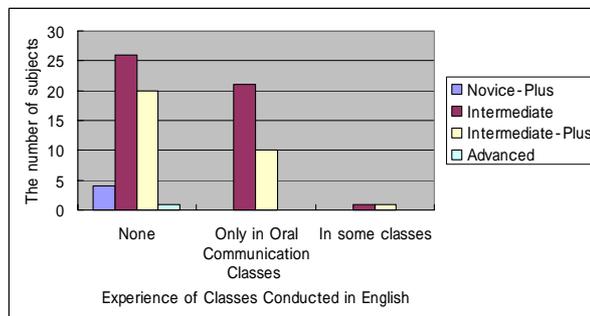


Figure 13: Classes Conducted in English - Listening Comprehension

The relation between translation practice in senior high school classes and listening comprehension is shown in Figure 14. Most of the Novice-Plus students were in English classes in which teachers translated all English sentences into Japanese. In this kind of classes, students seldom had occasions to listen to English from their teachers because all explanation was given in Japanese.

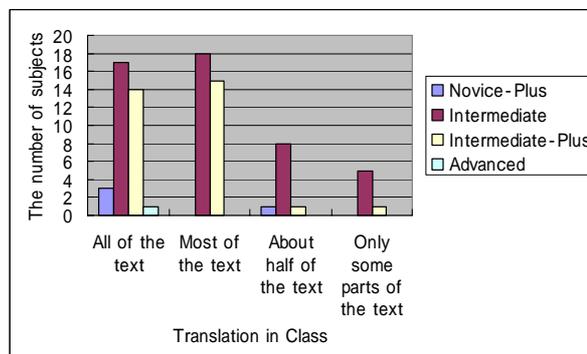


Figure 14: Translation in Classes - Listening Comprehension

6.2 The Influence of Individual Learning Strategies

The influence of translation while reading English passages was examined in Figure 15, 16, 17 and 18. The subjects who never translated while reading English had better listening ability and larger vocabulary size than the subjects who used translation. Besides that, most of the Novice-Plus students in listening comprehension always translated from English to Japanese and most of the subjects whose vocabulary size were in two thousands always or often used translation to read English passages. As far as reading ability is concerned, the portion of high level students was the highest in the category of never using translation (Figure 17). As for grammar, the subjects who had good knowledge of grammar were in all the categories in Figure 18. Therefore we cannot say that grammar translation method enforce the knowledge of grammar.

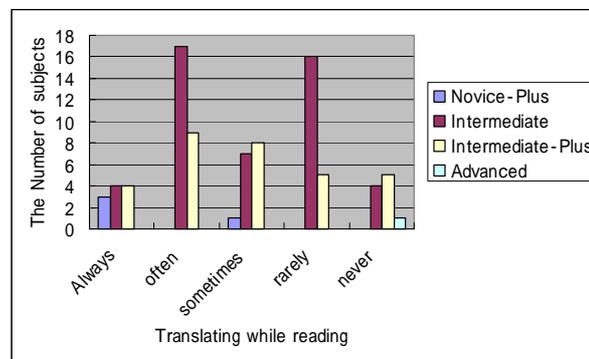


Figure 15: Translating while Reading English - Listening Comprehension

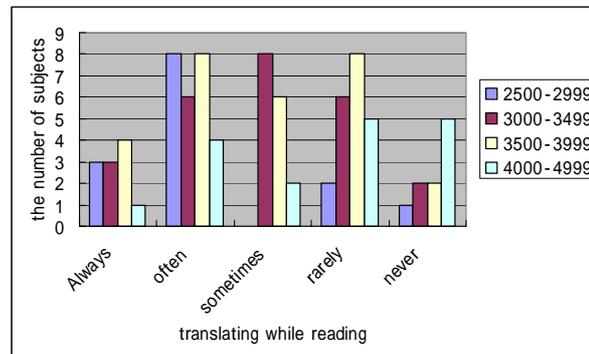


Figure 16: Translating while Reading English - Vocabulary Size

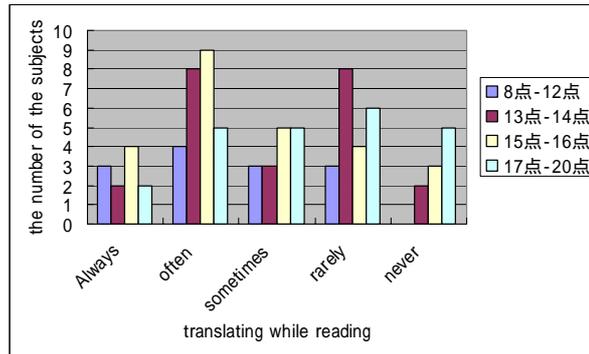


Figure 17: Translating while Reading English – Reading Comprehension

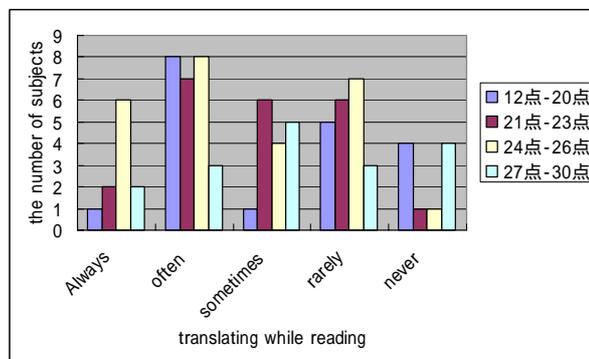


Figure 18: Translating while Reading English - Grammar

As is shown in Figure 19, studying grammar textbooks is not always effective to gain good knowledge of grammar. The subjects who got high score in grammar test distributed in all categories.

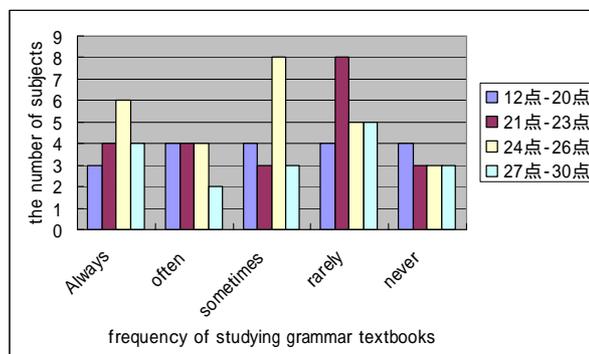


Figure 19: Frequency of Studying Grammar Books - Grammar

We can observe in Figure 20 that the subjects who learned English words in context had larger vocabulary than the subjects who never used context. Most of the students with more than four thousands words often or sometimes memorized new words in context, while two thirds of the subjects with less than three thousands words rarely or never memorized new words in context.

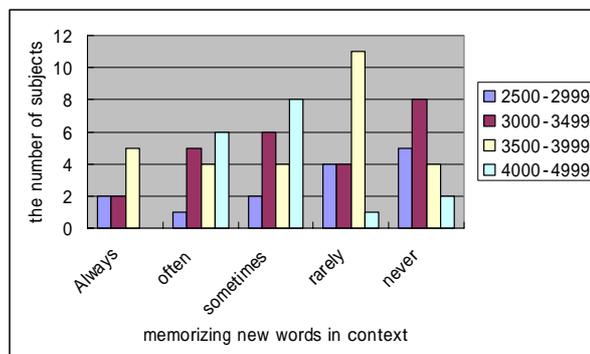


Figure 20: Memorizing New Words in Context - Vocabulary Size

7 Conclusion

The results show that the grammar translation method is still the main stream in senior high school English education in Japan even though Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology shows in the Course of Study that the aim of English education of secondary school is to foster communication ability. Many teachers use university entrance examination as an excuse to persist in the old but familiar method, however, attention should be paid to the fact that translation does not lead to high proficiency level of their students. Even in entrance examinations, students have to read some amount of English passages in a short time and they learn their own reading strategy of reading faster. English teachers should keep in mind that teaching some effective strategies without translation will enforce overall English ability of students. Another finding about senior high school English classes is that most English classes are still conducted in Japanese except Oral Communication subjects. That means students do not have any opportunities to use English as a means of communication in class and lack enough exposure of English.

The biggest concern about individual learning strategy is that only a few students have reading aloud practice on a daily basis though the practice is known as one of the most effective method to improve language ability. Another important finding is the relation between personal translation habit and vocabulary size. The result shows that vocabulary size of the students who read English passages without using translation is larger than that of the students who read by translating from English into Japanese. Guiding students in learning strategies with providing models in class will be essential to English teachers.

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