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Literature in Practice

Culturally-Familiar Folktales and Intralingual Translation for English Education

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Abstract

This pilot study examines a combination of intralingually-translated (literary English to simple English) culturally familiar materials for use in EFL. 24 college freshmen were presented with either a local or a foreign folktale several times over the course of three weeks. Some participants were given folktales which were intralingually translated into simple English, whereas others read only the original literary English. They provided written and oral responses about comprehension, emotional investment and enjoyment, perception of difficulty, and awareness of textual literariness. The findings corroborate extant research demonstrating an increased emotional investment and enjoyment in culturally familiar readings. However, the present study also suggests that the benefits of using culturally familiar materials may depreciate through repeated contact with the texts. In addition, it also shows that modulating reading difficulty in a mountain-valley pattern through a prolonged contact with the text correlated with greater desire to continue engaging with the reading.

Key words: literature, reading, culture

This report presents part of a pilot study addressing the use of English-language folktales as teaching materials for liberal arts English classes in a Japanese university. Our initial broad research question was, "What are the effects of cultural familiarity, textual difficulty, and literariness on learner comprehension and emotional engagement with the materials?" As detailed below, we analyzed learners' reactions to a South African folktale and a local (Tsugaru, Aomori) Japanese folktale through repeated encounters with the same story, but adjusted to different levels of linguistic difficulty.

Background

This experiment was seeded by another project which was focused on the collection and analysis of folktales told in the local Tsugaru vernacular. An inspiration for that project was the university's emphasis on promoting "glocal" education, defined as combining a global perspective with local action. Given this mission, the authors are seeking to develop English language teaching materials using local resources. However, they realized a need to first test the effective use of folktales as EFL materials.

The concept of culturally familiar contents in EFL has gained interest in recent years. Culturally familiar contents refer to teaching materials derived from language learners' cultural contexts, such as local news or literature that is written or translated into the learners' L2. It is hypothesized that such materials activate learners' schema, scaffolding comprehension, and stimulating emotional investment. As seen in the work of Segni & Davidson (2016) in Ethiopia, Tous & Haghighi (2013) in Iran, Sheridan, et al. (2019), and Carson (2019) in Japan, this is a topic of interest to researchers and educators around the globe. Tous & Haghighi (2013) and Carson (2019) demonstrated the effective use of culturally familiar materials for listening comprehension while Sheridan and his colleagues have focused on reading texts. Sheridan et al. (2018) examined the effect of replacing culturally familiar markers (names, monetary units) with Arabic and Kenyan terms in newspaper stories. Their tentative conclusions point to a positive impact on both vocabulary recall and content comprehension. Sheridan et al. (2019) confirmed these findings and supplemented them with the claim that cultural context has significant implications for students' engagement with the texts. Other work (Sheridan & Condon 2004, Sheridan et al. 2018) also demonstrated a strong preference for Japanese students to choose materials concerned with local rather than foreign topics when given agency over their own learning.

On the other hand, intralingual translation has yet to receive much attention in the field of language pedagogy. This term was first introduced by Jakobson (1959) as equivalent to "rewording...an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language," in contrast to interlingual translation (between languages) and intersemiotic translation (between verbal and non-verbal communication) (p. 233). The definition of intralingual translation has subsequently become heterogeneous within the field of translation studies, where it is sometimes even rejected as an acceptable paradigm of "translation" (Zethsen 2009, Luo 2019, Hill-Madsen 2019). Typically, it involves translation between dialects, such as British English and American English (Denton 2007, Hill-Madsen 2019) or Flemish Dutch and Netherlandic Dutch (Brems 2018). Another form of intralingual translation is simplification into "easy language," sometimes subcategorized into "plain English" or "accessible English." Typical extant research into easy language has investigated the accessible communication of medical information (Hill-Madsen 2015, Hill-Madsen 2019, Muñoz-Miquel 2012, Muñoz-Miquel et al. 2018). However, more recent studies have expanded the purview of intralingual translation and easy language studies to encompass their application to secondlanguage speakers, children's language learning, and textual adaptation (Luo 2019, Hansen-Schirra & Maaß 2020). Ahrens (2020) in particular argued for the instrumental use of easy language for second language users against the conclusions of several Germanlanguage studies (p. 93). Unfortunately, the specifics of the German critiques against easy language have not been made available in English, nor has research begun to evaluate the application of multiple textual formscombination of original and intralingual the translation-in an EFL environment.

This background guided our research questions:

1. To what extent can the use of local folktales as a form of culturally-familiar materials increase student engagement and comprehension?

2. How may a combination of easy English and literary English be received by learners during sustained engagement with a literary text?

The Study

Participants

The experiment was conducted over the course of four weeks in July 2022 with 24 university freshmen. The participants were recruited from advanced and upperintermediate level English classes and had Visualizing English Language Compentency (VELC) Test scores ranging from 534–741 (according to VELC Test student score profiles, approximately equivalent to 500-700 TOEIC). Participants were divided into four cohorts with roughly equal proficiency score distributions. Each cohort underwent the same procedure, but with different combinations of texts at different stages.

Materials

We utilized two public domain texts: the Japanese text "Monta the Monkey" (Saru no Monta) and the South African text "Who was the Thief". The former provided by Sato Tsuri of the Wa no Mukashi-ko storyteller group and the latter written by Sanni Metelerkamp (1914). After intralingual translation, a total of four texts were utilized during the experiment. The texts were categorized in two ways: by culture of origin and by linguistic difficulty. Two versions were based on "Monta the Monkey" as translated into English by the authors; the other two used "Who was the Thief?". The Japanese text is referred to below as the "JP" text, in contrast to the "foreign" (F) text. Both original texts contain nonstandard vocabulary and oral language, "marking" the texts as oral and literary. We refer to these two versions as marked English (ME). These were then intralingually translated into simple English (SE), reducing or eliminating oral interjections, nonstandard vocabulary, and significantly reducing sentence complexity. Table 1 compares the four prepared texts: F ME, JP ME, F SE, JP SE:

Table 1

Comparison of the four texts

	F ME	JP ME	F SE	JP SE
Word count	1122	1017	785	749
Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease	86	85.49	97.26	95.48
High frequency vocabulary (%)	85	81.8	91	89.3
Medium frequency vocabulary (%)	10	16.5	10.1	13.6
Low frequency vocabulary (%)	2	2.7	1.3	2.6
Academic vocabulary (%)	.3	.2	.1	.1
Non-English, non-standard, or names (total	63	53	2	30
instances)				
Non-English, non-standard, or names (unique	24	20	1	3
instances)				
Oral language / interjection instances	14	5	2	0

As the table indicates, while the F ME text was somewhat longer than JP ME, they were otherwise comparable in terms of reading ease and vocabulary level. Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease is mathematically calculated by using the average sentence length and average syllables per word. According to this formula, both ME texts are at 6th grade level, whereas the two SE texts are 5th grade level according to Text Compare (http://www.textcompare.org). The texts were then checked using the Longman Vocabulary Checker software (http://www.longmandictionariesusa.com), which can assess the percentage of text comprised of 9,000 commonly-used English words, broken into three tiers of high-, mid-, and low-frequency words. This tool was chosen as it is intended for English learners (Longman Dictionaries U.S.A.). The final three items refer to vernacular and oral language, elucidating the number of non-dictionary vocabulary words, non-English words, and names; as well as aspects of the text, particularly interjections, which give them a distinctly oral character. These items were eliminated or reduced as much as feasible for the SE versions. Note that the 30 instances of nonstandard English in the JP SE text are the result of the repetition of the two characters' names. When considering only unique nonstandard words, the number for that text drops to 3.

Procedure

The stages of the experiment were divided into a preinterview, three reading and writing tasks, primary

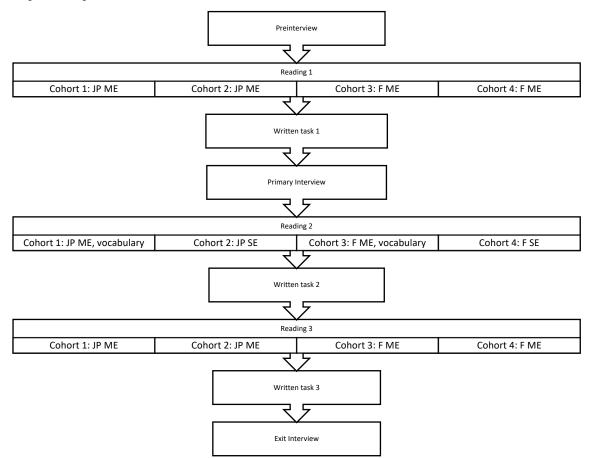
interview that came after the first reading and writing tasks, and an exit interview (see Figure 1).

The preinterview was conducted in person the week before the first reading session. Then, once a week, participants were given 30 minutes to read a short story, followed by 30 minutes to respond to a written survey. The primary and exit interviews were conducted over video chat. Both researchers participated in the semistructured interviews, one taking on the role of interviewer and the second writing notes. These roles were alternated throughout the process. The written surveys were completed using Microsoft forms. Both interviews and surveys were conducted in the participants' L1, Japanese.

Participants in the experiment gathered in a classroom over the course of three sessions. Each meeting consisted of 30 minutes of reading followed by 30 minutes to complete the written task. During the first stage, two cohorts received JP ME and two received F ME. Throughout the experiment, JP readers would only read JP texts and F readers would only read F. In the second stage, each cohort received either the ME or SE version of the story they had read during the previous week. The two ME texts were supplemented with Japanese translations for difficult vocabulary words in the margins of the page. In the third stage, all participants read the original ME text without any additional support. No dictionaries or other reference materials were permitted during the experiment.

Figure 1

Experimental procedure



Both the interviews and written surveys covered a range of topics. The primary purpose was to ascertain the participants' immediate reaction to the texts' difficulty and appeal. The surveys also dealt with general comprehension (including plot summary, identifying protagonist(s)), understanding of the story as a literary text (regarding the role of the narrator, moral of the story, humor), and their ability to recognize literary language. The interviews helped the researchers to interpret the quantitative responses. Pertinent to the present report were scores given to perceived difficulty of the texts (1-10 points) and enjoyability (1-5 points) after the first two readings. After the third reading, participants reported their overall change in enjoyment (positive, negative, unchanged) and the number of times they desired to read the text.

Results

Enjoyment

The quantitative data revealed an overall positive change in enjoyment in reading the texts as measured over three sessions of engaging with the same story. After each of the first two sessions, participants were asked to rank their enjoyment (Jp. *omoshiroi, yomu igi ga aru*; En. interesting/funny, worthwhile to read) of the text on a scale of 1–5. Ratings for both the first readings (F and J) were mostly favorable (Figure 2), with only 12.5% of total respondents with a score of 2, versus 16.7% scoring 3, 37.5% scoring 4, and 33.3% scoring 5.

When comparing scores after the first and second readings (Table 2), participants assigned the Japanese texts saw an overall neutral (50%) to negative (41.7%) change in enjoyment scores, whereas readers of the foreign text saw neutral (50%) to positive (50%) changes. When divided between readers of simple English (SE) and readers of marked English (ME), the results were much more divided, with a balance of positive and negative changes for both.

As the scores in Figure 2 reveal, the narrow fivepoint scale resulted in a number of scores hitting a ceiling after a single reading. To address this shortcoming, participants were asked to reflect on their enjoyment compared with their previous readings qualitatively, describing a positive, negative, or neutral change following the third reading session. The results can be seen in Table 3.

Figure 2

Enjoyment of first reading, by VELC Test score and country

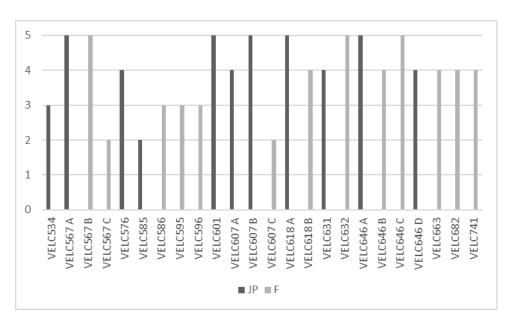


Table 2

Change in enjoyment between first and second readings

Change	JP	%	F	%	SE	%	ME	0⁄0
Decrease	5	41.7	0	0	3	25	2	16.7
No change	6	50	6	50	5	41.7	7	58.3
Increase	1	8.3	6	50	4	33.3	3	25
Total	12	50	12	50	12	50	12	50

Table 3

C1	•	• ,	C.	.1 . 1	1.
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0 00	~	0						
Change	JP	%	F	%	SE	%	ME	%
Down	1	8.3	0	0	0	0	1	8.3
Neutral	9	75	4	33.3	6	50	7	58.3
Up	2	16.7	8	66.7	6	50	4	33.3
Total	12	50	12	50	12	50	12	50

At this stage, the Japanese-text readers' response was 75% neutral, with only one respondent reporting a negative change. In contrast, the group of foreign text readers universally improved, now reporting 66.7% experiencing a positive change. A similar observation can be made for the SE versus ME groups. SE negative enjoyment responses fell to 0%, with positive rising to 50%, and ME negative down to 8.3% and positive up to 33.3%.

The interviews provide more insight into this nebulous concept of "enjoyment." In the final interview, participants were directly asked for their evaluation of the three-stage reading process. Participants explicitly linked comprehension to enjoyment of the text, many of

them suggesting that their repeated readings were accompanied by higher levels of both comprehension and pleasure. How they articulated the nature of that comprehension differed. For example, participant L articulated how, over the course of the experiment, "I began to understand some of the contents [of the story]...umm, and the number of times I thought 'ah, so that's what that means' increased. I felt that was really enjoyable." In this case, the student seems to be motivated by the process of language acquisition and gaining understanding of the text. Participant R, by contrast, specifically treated the text as a literary object. They explained that "At the time of the first interview, too...really [...] I could not catch the meaning of the story [...] I could not enjoy it as a story," but by the third iteration, "There was the enjoyment or something from being able to read the story." Participant O offered a concurring opinion, explaining that only by the third iteration were they "Not simply reading the English, but I thought I was able to turn my attention to the moral and entertainment that was the original point of the text." On the other hand, participant K reported no change in enjoyment, scoring it a maximum 5 points throughout the experiment because they had an intrinsic interest in fairy tales (otogibanashi) and children's songs (doyo), and so found it simply "interesting as a story" (monogatari toshite omoshirokatta). Participant M concurred that "I was not familiar with the story itself at first, so I enjoyed reading it, it was interesting" (hanashi jitai wa, motomoto

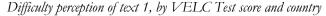
watashi ga shiranakute, omoshirokatta node yonde tanoshikatta), although, by the third reading when the story was no longer novel, had lost interest.

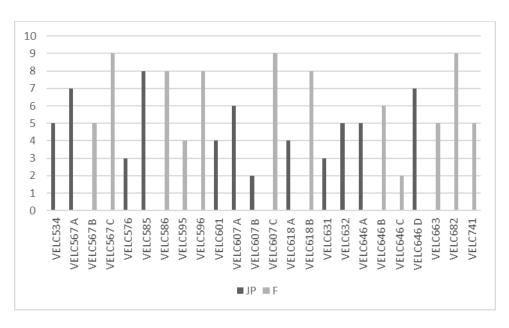
Perceived Difficulty

previous section introduced The results demonstrating that both cultural familiarity and literariness may be factors affecting enjoyment. Yet, another critical element affecting enjoyment scores herein may be the perceived difficulty of the texts. The term "perceived difficulty" is used in distinction from comprehension, describing mastery of the language itself. By contrast, perception addresses the learners' subjective mental and emotional states as well as confidence. As demonstrated in Chart 1, the authors strove to balance the word count, Flesh-Kincaid Readability scores, and number of non-dictionary words, etc. However, the culturally unfamiliar materials were additionally hypothesized to correlate with higher perceived difficulty.

Regardless of the objective difficulty measures, student perceptions of textual difficulty were revealing. Participants rated the difficulty of the texts on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the most challenging, after the first and second readings:

Figure 3





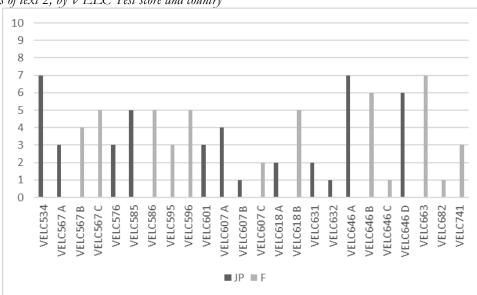


Figure 4 *Difficulty perceptions of text 2, by VELC Test score and country*

The average difficulty score of the first F reading was 6.4 (ME cohort = 7, SE cohort = 5.9), while the JP text was scored on average a full 1.5 points lower, 4.9 (ME cohort = 4.7, SE cohort = 5.2). As these figures illustrate, there seems to be little if any correlation between participant VELC score and their perceived difficulty of text. In other words, proficiency did not correspond with the perception of difficulty. Conversely, in the case of ME texts read in the second session, there were 4 ratings of 6 or higher for participants with a VELC score of 618 or higher (the top 45%), versus only one such rating for the lower VELC-score half of the cohort.

Regarding the second reading, the F ME readers' average perceived difficulty changed by -2.3 points, whereas the JP ME changed by only -.5 points. This resulted in nearly equal average difficulty scores, of 4.7 and 4.2 respectively. There was also a less pronounced change from the initial ME texts to SE texts in the second round than expected: the average difficulty score for readers of F SE changed by -3, and the JP SE score changed by -1.6. Perhaps more surprisingly, the introduction of SE did not result in a substantial difference in difficulty perception for foreign text readers when compared to those who read F ME texts with vocabulary supplementation: -3 for the former and -2.3 for the latter. If we remove the outlier -8 change from one F SE reader, the average foreign SE difficulty perception plummets to -2.2-practically identical to the ME data.

To simplify the above, we can make three main observations about perceived difficulty following the second reading. First, that difficulty perception did not correlate with proficiency. Second, that through the second reading, there was a minimal change in average perceived difficulty of both the SE and ME versions of the culturally familiar text. Finally, that there was little difference in perceived difficulty reported by readers of F ME and F SE texts, although both scores, on average, fell significantly.

Desire for Repeated Readings

As participants engaged with the same text multiple times, they were asked about the number of times they wanted to have read the text after the final session. They gave a written numerical response in the third survey task as well as a more detailed explanation in the exit interview. Only 12.5% of participants preferred to have read the text a single time, 33.3% twice, and 54.2% three times.

More can be said regarding the combination of difficulty perception and the number of times participants desired to read the texts. Some simple observations can be made when specifically comparing the change in difficulty perception between the first and second readings to the number of times participants reported wanting to read the text.

1 1			0 5	2	0				
Change difficulty	+2	0	-1	-2	-3	-4	-7	-8	Total
Read 1 time		1	1	1					3
Read 2 times	1	1	4	1		1			8
Read 3 times	2	0	2	1	4	2	1	1	13
									N=24

 Table 4

 Times participants wanted to read text, by change in difficulty between readings 1 and 2

First, three participants scored the difficulty of the second text higher than the first, including one JP ME, one F ME, and one JP SE. It is doubtful, should the readers compare the texts side-by-side, that any would find the second reading, either in SE or ME supplemented with vocabulary, more difficult than the first. This reinforces the fact that we are measuring *perception* of difficulty. In this case, the higher scores likely either resulted from imprecise recall or a recalibration of participants' difficulty perception.

The three participants who preferred to read the text only once saw a modicum of change in difficulty level, ranging from no change (0) to a slight decrease (-2). This is consistent with these participants' report of a neutral change in enjoyment at the end of the experiment. The eight students who preferred to read the text twice also tended to recognize less initial change in difficulty, with half of them reporting a slight decrease in difficulty (-1), one participant reporting no change, and one reporting an (anomalous) increase (+2). Of the 13 participants who wanted to read the text three times, 5 (38.5%) experienced either a moderate decrease in difficulty (-2 to -1) or a slight (anomalous) increase in difficulty (+2). On the other hand, six of the group (46.1%) reported substantial decreases in perceived difficulty (-3 to -4), and a further two participants reported extreme changes (-7 and -8).

While no cohorts started with SE or vocabulary supplements, participants were also asked in the final interview their opinion of a reading sequence beginning with a scaffolded form. The majority of participants supported the sequence they personally experienced, citing the importance of struggling before receiving comprehension aids. Echoing a common sentiment among the participants, Participant I stated that "struggling to read" (*ganbatte yomeru*) the first text was motivating as a test of their abilities. Likewise, participant J called the first reading "comprehensionfocused reading" (*dokkai*), whereas by the second stage "I was able to focus on the contents" (*naiyō ni shūchū dekita*). A lone voice of dissent, participant V felt that the experienced structure was like arduous "training" (*kunren*) and would have preferred a simpler text first.

Discussion

This study provides some new and meaningful insights regarding the application of culturally familiar material and intralingual translation of literary texts in EFL. We find merit in the use of culturally familiar materials in the short term, but also that those benefits may depreciate through a second contact with the same text. In addition, the data suggest that modulating task difficulty in a mountain-and-valley pattern may increase learner enjoyment.

Enjoyment is a qualitative aspect of language learning which has been hypothesized to correlate strongly with learner motivation and achievement, making the following observations relevant to EFL more broadly (Liu, 2022). While the small numerical range given for reading enjoyment (1-5 points) may have limited the potential for more nuanced indications of change over time (one third of initial responses scored the maximum, leaving no room for subsequent increase), there are still some observable patterns. First, the foreign (F) text readers initially scored enjoyment lower, on average, than Japanese (JP). Then, when comparing changes in enjoyment (decrease, no change, increase) between first and second readings, Japanese text enjoyment fell whereas foreign text enjoyment rose, on the whole. Finally, taking a longitudinal view across the entire experiment, taken as a group, all cohorts saw an increase in reported enjoyment, with the biggest changes occurring in the groups reading the foreign and simple English (SE) texts. In other words, there seems to have been a higher initial enjoyment hurdle with the foreign text compared to the Japanese text; a phenomenon predictable based on the extant research on culturally familiar materials. However, repeated engagement with the same culturally familiar text seems to have dampened enjoyment until the third and final reading. This suggests the importance of taking a long view of

learner enjoyment in EFL when engaging with the same text or topic over time.

Similarly, while the initial difficulty perception of the Japanese text was lower, the second reading saw greater drop in both the foreign texts' difficulties than in either of the Japanese texts. Thus, the shock of unfamiliarity, which may increase perceived difficulty, was, in this instance, overcome through a second contact with the text. In addition, the near-identical perceived difficulty scores for the foreign simple English and foreign marked English with vocabulary supplements suggests that cultural familiarity is a greater determining factor in perceived difficulty than intralingual translation. Further research should be conducted to determine if culturally familiar materials for short-term study can reliably yield greater learner interest and enjoyment due to the lack of schemabuilding hurdle.

The interview questions relating to enjoyment suggested an additional element, beyond cultural familiarity and unfamiliarity: literariness. Some answers suggest that the use of folktales also had a significant impact on participants' interaction with and emotional investment in them. The extent of the motivational increase provided by literary materials requires further investigation, however.

Conclusion

As this was an exploratory experiment designed to probe multiple questions and identify areas for further investigation, it suffers from limitations in controlling for multiple variables and depth of analysis. In addition, while the participants were sorted based on their VELC Test scores for convenience, the VELC score is based on a combination of passive skills and does not exclusively test for reading comprehension and vocabulary level, and therefore may not be an appropriate aptitude test for creating cohorts for this type of experiment. In addition, while the researchers strove to create parity between the foreign and Japanese texts, a desire to respect the source material coupled with inherently non-quantifiable aspects of literary writing resulted in some discrepancies which may have affected participant responses.

Despite these limitations, this study offers several conclusions, each of which begs further investigation. We tentatively conclude, first, that the culturally familiar content scaffolded the reading experience, lowering the perceived difficulty. Based on the quantitative data, we speculate that the higher initial difficulty rating of the foreign texts offered more room for scores to change, and also that reencountering the foreign text helped participants to develop the necessary schema to overcome the hurdle of culturally unfamiliar material. Either way, these results suggest that cultural familiarity correlates strongly with student perceptions of textual difficulty, and that the combination of difficulty and familiarity correlate with enjoyment. Finally, although the extent of this research is quite limited, these initial results indicate that a substantial decrease in perceived textual difficulty in the middle of a series of readings may be linked to an appreciation for more sustained engagement with the text.

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