

Students' Picks: News of the Week

–An Attempt to Build a Firm Foundation for Interpreting –

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This is a full version of the script from the author's presentation¹ at ATT8, the 8th Asian Translation Traditions Conference, titled *Conflicting Ideologies and Cultural Mediation – Hearing, Interpreting, Translation Global Voices*, in SOAS or School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London on July 6th, 2017.

1. Cover Page



Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for joining me.

I am Hiromi Sodekawa, an associate-professor in the Department of British and American Studies at Aichi Prefectural University of Japan, although I have only been teaching for a year and a half. More recently I have been a simultaneous interpreter and doing some broadcasting interpreting as well.

I am very happy to be back in London. From 1994 to 1998 I worked for the BBC World Service in London as a broadcast interpreter. This was actually the start of my career as an interpreter. So, of course, I have a personal attachment to this city. SOAS recently gave me another “first”: the opportunity to make this presentation at an international conference. This city has now provided me two important “firsts”.

Thank you, London.

2. Introducing Myself

A brief introduction, showing a picture of me, working in the BBC Tokyo studio.

3. Purpose of the Method

I am responsible for the interpreting classes at the university.

While language and skills for interpreting are essential for professional interpreters, they are not enough. Interpreters also need to have basic general knowledge in every field, including politics, economics, culture, science, and world affairs, both in the source and target language, regardless of what subjects are being interpreted.

Based on my experience as an interpreter, I created a method that uses newspaper articles to help students acquire both contemporary language and general knowledge. Throughout the 2016 academic year, I adopted this method for the undergraduate and graduate levels in interpreting and communication studies classes.

The number of students was as follows: sophomores: 15 (1st semester of 2016), 16 (2nd semester of 2016); juniors: 8 (1st of 2016), 4 (2nd of 2016); graduate students: 2 (1st of 2016), 3 (2nd of 2016).

By the way, I am continuing to use this method this year as well.

4. Method

The method is deceptively simple.

1) Once a week, students are asked to pick two news articles in Japanese and then two related articles in English, focusing on the different perspectives of their news sources. The news sources can be of print- and/or web-versions. To widen their views, they are also advised to read major national newspapers rather than use local or regional sources.

Here it might be useful to say something about the press in Japan. Probably up until 10 years ago, most Japanese households subscribed to a set of morning and evening editions of a general, daily newspaper. This was made possible by Japan's uniquely efficient home-delivery service. We do not have the custom of buying newspapers from a kiosk or stand. With the rapid rise of the internet, combined with the recession, however, Japan's press subscriptions have been falling dramatically. Although by global standards circulation of its general press is still high, it is steadily falling, particularly with the younger generation.

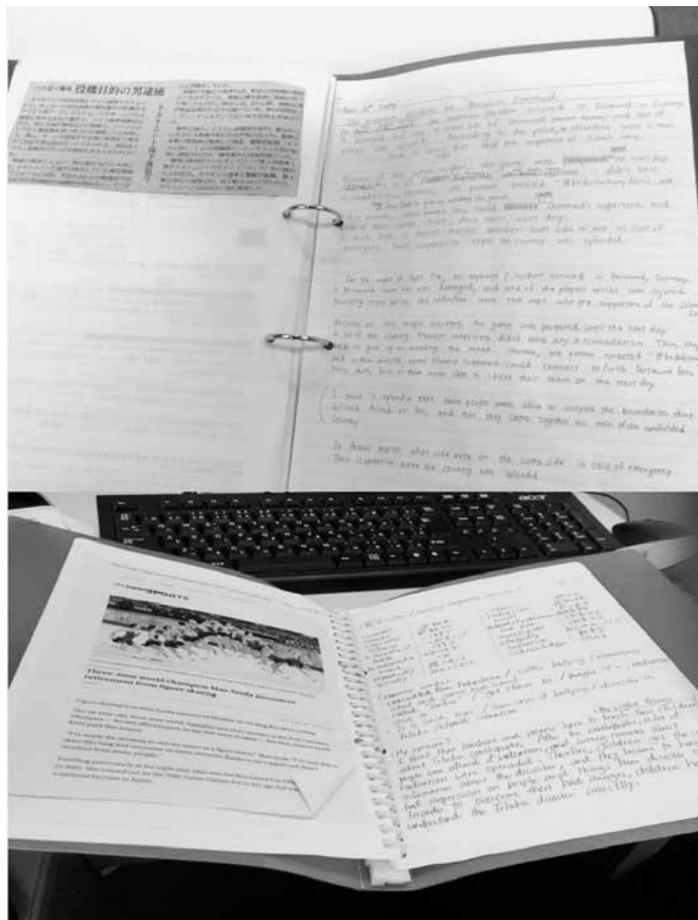
In a 2011 list of the world's top newspapers by circulation, compiled by the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, the Yomiuri and Asahi newspapers, placed first and second, respectively. But almost 3.3 million subscribers dropped for the period of 2013-2016 (general newspapers sales in 2016: 39.8 million, according to The Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association). Even though Japan's national press have tried hard to reverse this trend by setting up an online-edition, they are having difficulties to find and retain readers.

This is arguably unfortunate because newspapers at home are believed to help sustain Japan's significantly high literacy rate of 99%. That, I believe, partially underpins what we call, reading, writing, and calculating skills (said to be the three basic skills for survival in society). It is often said that even beggars in Japan read newspapers.

Well then, is it possible for an instructor, like me, to reverse this trend? No. Not that. But it is a shame not to at least utilize this wonderful source of information at hand.

2) Let me go back to the subject of the method. After choosing their articles, students are required to note vocabulary and terms specific to their subject. They have to compile a file called "News of the Week," and make a short class presentation in English. This file becomes a treasure trove of information and knowledge, which can be used as reference material for their graduation theses. They also make a short presentation on their news topics in the class, focusing on 5W1H (when, where, who, what, why and how). Depending on a topic, the instructor provides background explanations, and occasionally leads discussions among students.

5. Process



These are pictures of the students' files. They were neatly organized. Though it is not on display, one student added an illustration to each article. She created her own world. Excellent!

At an early stage of the classes, students seemed to struggle to find their way to handle the assignment. But gradually they got used to it, and more interested in news. Along with accumulating knowledge, their interpreting skills got better.

In order to confirm what I observed, I conducted a student survey about "News of the Week" and had them make a report on it.

6. Reaction from Students

6.1 Survey

According to the survey, this assignment was both fun and educational (96%).

25 out of 26 students responded to the survey. The denominator is less than 30, so this may not be statistically significant, but it could be a good reference for consideration.

1) Questionnaire

- Q1. What kind of news did you pick?
- Q2. Did you become interested in news or not?
- Q3. Was this assignment useful for your studies?
If so, in what way?
If not, why?
- Q4. Was it fun to work on or not?
- Q5. Any other remarks.

Q1.

They picked whatever sounded interesting: Brexit, terror incidents including shooting rampages in the US, the US presidential election, IT related issues, Japan's election and security related laws, sports, entertainment, social discrimination,

earthquake and natural disasters, and Middle-East issues.

Just about anything, although economics and science were not popular topics.

Q2.

Every student except one said they had become more interested in the news. That is 96%.

Q3.

All the students said this assignment was useful and effective. No exceptions. Vocabulary and expressions increased. There were new usages of familiar words. They acquired the skills to read newspapers faster and made a short presentation in English with more confidence. Reading newspapers became part of their routine activities. They got used to different news styles. They became aware of the different styles of headlines in Japanese and English papers. Became more interested in overseas opinions about Japan-Sino relations. Started to think more about politics in general. Paid attention to rare and unique news. Tried to find news topics that would entertain their classmates.

Q4.

Fun but hard. Hard but fun. At the beginning, they felt overwhelmed by this demanding assignment, but in the end found it unexpectedly enjoyable. And it was interesting to hear their other classmates' choices.

Q5.

It would have been easier if they only had had to pick one topic. Although vocabulary and expressions increased, they were quickly forgotten.

6.2 Report from Students

Sophomores

- Became interested in what is going on in the world. Encountered new vocabulary and terminology, both in English and Japanese.
- Learned lots of unfamiliar words, such as vigilance, xenophobia, aging (greying) society, allegedly, disarmament, claim of responsibility for, etc.
- Knowing about the US presidential elections, including each candidate, made it easier to understand the news in general, again, both in English and Japanese.
- Reading newspaper everyday opened a gateway to other seemingly difficult issues.
- Donald Trump's words, such as nasty woman, bad hombres, deplorable, irredeemable were new.
- Learned that Japanese and English use different phrases to express the same content or words. Sometimes one word in one language needs two or three words in the other. Completely interchangeable words are rather rare.
- Followed up on a news item after working on a topic. For example, wondered what would happen to Bob Dylan after being awarded the Nobel Prize?
- Found interesting differences between news media, for example: The Nuclear Arms Ban Treaty was adopted in the UN, while Japan opposed it, despite being the only atomic-bombed country. Japanese newspapers dealt with this on the front page, while the New York Times did not pick it up at all.
- Understood more about international affairs, and the reality that tragic news as

well as hopeful news happens every day.

Juniors

- Had not read news articles in print and on the internet before. Now did not feel barriers to reading them. Had fun talking about their picks with classmates. Classmates' choices made them inquisitive about other news.
- Learned that in English, the same thing could be said differently, for example, the trees are moved, are cut down, are felled. The Dentsu woman worker's suicide due to overwork made them wonder what kind of companies they should work for in the future.
- Saw the effects of different relations with the US, for example, during the US presidential election, the US, Japan, and the UK presented quite different perspectives on it.
- Learned about lots of tragic incidents related to the discrimination still occurring in the US.
- Discovered the different layout techniques in Japanese and English newspapers. Photos and title choices were also different. Recognized that without knowing the background, even Japanese news subjects could be difficult to understand.

Graduate students

- Kenji Goto, a Japanese journalist, was killed by ISIS. One student felt ashamed not to know more about the Middle East. So he decided that reading about this area would be his assignment.
- Tried to cover many areas from politics and international affairs to economics. Comparing Japanese with English media was helpful to recognize differences, in terms of their perspectives or stances and their expressions and vocabulary. Tried to find something interesting for their classmates.
- Tried to extend their scopes of interest from familiar topics to unfamiliar ones, such as science, politics, and economics. A short, public presentation induced a little tension, but helped in memorizing content and vocabulary.

7. Analysis

Students' main news sources were the major Japanese newspapers: Asahi, Yomiuri, Mainichi, and the local newspaper, Chunichi. The NHK News Web (the Japanese equivalent of the BBC) and other private broadcasting corporations' websites were also used. As for English news, The Japan Times was overwhelmingly referred to because it deals accurately with news about Japan and is well circulated in Japan. It was followed by The New York Times, and the BBC and CNN news sites. The Guardian, The Independent, The Wall Street Journal, The Telegraph, Yahoo UK, and the Global Times were also mentioned.

Students picked just about any topic, although as mentioned earlier, economics and science were not so popular, probably because these areas need a higher level of specialized knowledge. Cultural and educational topics did not often appear on the list, probably because they are a bit too domestically or regionally rooted and finding equivalent English versions would not have been easy.

I urged students to pick one domestic and one international topic. Or one challenging topic and then a lighter one. To stick to one topic and follow it regularly was also allowed. As a result, some students dealt with automotive related or IT

game related topics in the entire course. Others started to pick controversial issues, such as the overseas dispatch of Japanese self-defense forces to South Sudan, security issues, TPP, and nuclear power issues. This pleased me to no end, knowing that a deeper understanding of one area often opens a door to another.

As mentioned, in their files, some students added their own comments to the news articles or even put illustrations in them. That was a pleasant surprise, going beyond my expectations.

Furthermore, I noticed their interpreting performance got better for the speeches of Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton (the materials used in the interpreting classes), because their knowledge about the election had increased. Students were attentive to various English expressions, using them in their English writings for other classes.

8. Challenges for the Future

This method has proven to be both useful and educational. However, it is also clear that only one year has passed since I adopted it, and many things remain to be seen. Issues to consider:

- Some students are likely to focus only on English news articles, because they must make a presentation in English. However, a strong, solid Japanese language capacity is crucial for the foundation of their thinking and intelligence. I want to emphasize this.
- Some students pick easy, less complicated stories with limited news sources. At the early stages this is fine. But exploring more complex news topics with new sources is essential.
- Students do not show interest in economics or science. But interpreting and communication studies courses cannot fully cover these areas. The university itself needs to strengthen the education of these subjects.
- I could spend an entire 90-minute class just on News of the Week. Time is too constrained.
- Asahi Shimbun, a major general newspaper in Japan, is conducting a campaign for Newspapers in Education to encourage newspapers for children. I would like to work with them to promote newspaper reading among university students.

9. Conclusion

With this method, you can catch three birds with one stone: 1) picking up useful expressions for both speaking and writing in Japanese and English, 2) acquiring basic knowledge in every field and expanding views on international affairs, thereby improving interpreting skills, and 3) using their files as reference materials for their dissertations.

Let me also point out another benefit. This technique can be applied to any other language, and is useful not just for interpreting training, but for expanding knowledge and widening world views. So, I would like to highly recommend this method to other language learners and instructors.

In support of this method, I would also like to mention Daniel Gile's theory and his support from one of Japan's prominent interpreters, Tatsuya Koyamatsu.

Gile's theory:

Comprehension =
KL (Knowledge of the Language) +
ELK (Extra-Linguistic Knowledge) +
A (Analysis).

Mr. Tatsuya Koyamatsu, a legendary simultaneous interpreter in Japan, emphasized the importance of ELK in his lecture at my university last year. I totally agree with him.

In Japan, what we call TOEIC or The Test of English for International Communication, is considered a good measurement for one's English proficiency, and often adopted by universities and companies. But a high TOEIC score does not necessarily guarantee good interpreting skills. That is only part of KL.

However, people in Japan believe that a high proficiency of English automatically produces a good interpreter. Mr. Koyamatsu said this prevailing notion is wrong. Students are in the midst of acquiring all sorts of knowledge, as well as skills in English, so he wants to call attention to the importance of ELK as well as Japanese language skills. Mr. Koyamatsu's points are based on Daniel Gile's theory as well as referring to the effectiveness of a method such as News of the Week.

Before closing, let me make one last comment, one about the relation between an interpreter's knowledge and intelligence and their neutrality. While interpreting, interpreters must put their own opinions and convictions aside to stay neutral and to accurately convey what is being said. They cannot be activists or representatives of any particular ideology, mediators, or negotiators of conflict. Whether their work assignments are about business, trade, and conflict negotiations, which are deeply involved with national interests, or not, the principle code of conduct cannot be changed. Because of this, it is often said that interpreters should be machine-like converters from one language to another. In reality, however, interpreters are only human, and their personal "interpretation" is inevitable, as the word "interpreter" itself implies. Interpreters therefore must be aware of how they might be influencing a discussion. To stay a neutral and fair mediator between different languages, interpreters need to maintain comprehensive understandings of the topics and a broad, general intelligence.

Thank you.

Addition

Two participants with the author in the middle. One professor took interest in the method of “News of the Week” asking for further documents, and the other professor informed me later that he adopted this method for his class. Needless to say, I was delighted to hear this.



Note 1: The numbering of chapters refers to the number of power point slides. However, this script does not demonstrate all the screens, except for the students' notebooks.

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