

Cultivating Inferencing Skills in Mature Language Learners: The Case of Schooling

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Introduction

This article reports on the instructor's attempts to help the adult learners of English in her intensive university classes to develop inferencing skills. The term "inferencing" refers to using what we already know to predict meaning; otherwise stated, intelligent guessing. While foreign language learners in Japan receive substantial training in certain skills such as dictionary use and translation, they are often reluctant to take risks. Rather than striving to identify familiar elements and link them logically to try to determine meaning, there is a tendency among language students to focus on the unfamiliar and declare early defeat. This is particularly obvious in the case of older learners.

A bit of background is in order regarding the teaching context. After 25 years of teaching English, French and Linguistics to undergraduate English majors, the author had the opportunity to move to the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Nara University where one of her duties (and one of the most interesting new challenges) involves teaching mature students. Separate from the regular *gakubu* programs, the university runs a highly successful correspondence course leading to a full B.A. degree in Cultural Properties and History that currently has 1,300 students from all over the country. While much of the coursework is done through correspondence, the students are required to be on campus ("Schooling") for courses in local history and culture, visits to burial mounds and world heritage sites and language courses. These are run as three-day intensives during long weekends and the summer and spring breaks. With an average age of about 60 and some well into their 80s, successful

completion of the language requirement is for many of these students the most intimidating part of the program—understandable given that their academic interests lie elsewhere and that they have generally been away from English for several decades.

The author is in charge of English III, offered twice annually in July and February. In spite of (or perhaps in part due to) her enthusiasm to work with mature learners, the author had several mis-starts before settling on a theme-based approach that aims for a balance of the four skills. Two earlier LLL-SIG presentations focused on specific ways of meeting the goals of the course, such as the introduction of writing tasks as a lead-in to communication activities and taking advantage of the fact that the students are very knowledgeable about Japan and eager to share that knowledge with me—in most cases their first non-Japanese instructor. While the course is now running smoothly and eliciting positive evaluations, the instructor continues to seek new ways to improve it.

The latest inspiration came in the form of a large cardboard box that had been sitting unopened in the author's office since her move from her former school. Inside were piles of notebooks, teaching materials and presentation notes from French and Linguistics classes taught many years ago, which led to an "*ah-ha!*" moment. As a teacher of French to English majors, the author was frustrated to find that students who had had a minimum of six years of English—another Indo-European language with which it shares numerous features—were starting over from scratch with the new language. Rather than trying to identify familiar elements and patterns based on the study of their first foreign language, the students persistently focused in on what they *didn't* know and were reluctant to take chances with the FL2. One of my personal missions was to find ways to help students in these French (and later, Linguistics) classes to hone better guessing skills. Using "what you know" includes things like vocabulary that is similar to English or has crossed over into Japanese; knowledge about how language works in general; and general knowledge about the world. Even simple

things like making use of illustrations and capitalization conventions often provide clues, but weaker language learners tend to ignore the illustrations and the cognates.

Here's where the *Ah-ha!* comes in: Looking through that box, the author realized that her mature learners have a lot in common with those French students. They are well prepared, armed with a dictionary, notebook, at least half a dozen perfectly sharpened pencils; they copy down everything that is written on the board; and they diligently do their homework assignments. Ideal students? In many ways, yes. However, they come to class fully expecting NOT to understand.

Like my French students, they tend to push the reset button, relying on word for word translations into their native language, preferably spoon-fed by the teacher. Changing that mindset would mean changing my approach. It requires training and practice to get the students to take risks with a foreign language. From the next session, the instructor began introducing new tasks and tweaking old ones with the specific aim of challenging the students to apply what they know about language to figure things out without explicit instruction. This article will introduce a series of tasks designed to do just that.

Task #1: Grammar Awareness

This simple task using nonsense words is commonly used in elementary schools in the U.S. to reinforce some important points about grammar. (A shout-out here to Mrs. Bombicino, my fourth grade teacher.) While the fourth question would prove baffling even to a native speaker, the three questions that precede it can be quite easily answered with a basic knowledge of the structure of English. This exercise shows what a great help word order is in determining meaning. By relying on what they know about how English sentence structure works, the students were able to identify **who** did **what** and **where**. As a follow-up, the students were asked to create original sentences with the same pattern, which they were able to do with

little difficulty. The class favorite? “The students took the American teacher to a pub.”

“The gorkle took the maisly furkles to the blinto.”

Q1: Who took the furkles to the blinto?

(A: The gorkle.)

Q2: Where did the furkles go?

(A: To the blinto.)

Q3: What kind of furkles were they?

(A: Maisley furkles.)

Q4: What is a gorkle? A furkle? A blinto?

A: ???

Task #2: Dialogue Listening

This activity and the one that follows involve tweaking listening exercises in such a way as to help the learners sharpen their guessing skills prior to listening. One of the conversations we worked on the morning of the second day involved two speakers negotiating a date (Pak, 1991, p. 53.)

It is short and simple. Before listening, the students were put into pairs and asked to fill in the blanks with appropriate words and phrases. Having during the previous day’s lesson become re-acclimated to English, they were now challenged to partially create the materials for conversation practice by themselves rather than using a prepared text. Being asked to make predictions before listening forced them to consider both meaning and grammar for clues. When they finally did hear the CD, they were better able to catch what was said than previous groups who had not done the guessing task first. In addition, this exercise reinforced the important notion that there is not always only one correct answer.

Kimo: Ai, I was wondering...are you free on _____ night?
 Ai: Yeah, I think so. Why?
 Kimo: Well, would you like to _____ with me?
 Ai: Sure, _____. What do you want to see?
 Kimo: I want to see the new movie with _____.
 Ai: Oh, me too!
 Kimo: Great! There's a show at _____. Say, why don't we
 _____ after the movie?
 Ai: Um, all right... if you're paying!

Task #3: DVD Listening Task

The instructor makes frequent use of DVD listening exercises like the one below from *World Link I* in which a number of English speakers talk briefly on the same theme or answer the same question. These are generally done as cloze tasks, with students listening for the words and phrases that have been omitted. To encourage the development of guessing skills, students were put in pairs and asked to guess the missing words before watching the DVD. The first letters were given as clues. Note that in some instances there are several plausible answers.

Nick: My name is Nick Raducanu. I'm 23 years old and
 I'm from the United States. I speak (E) and
 I also speak (F).

Woo Sung: My name is Woo Sung. I'm from Seoul, Korea.
 I am 20 years old and I'm a (s).
 I speak English, Korean and French.

Natalie: My name's Natalie Dangler. I'm (t -f)
 years old. I live in the United States and I'm a reporter
 at a television station.

Dayanne: My name is Dayanne Leal. I am from Brazil and
 my first language is Portuguese. I'm not very (t)
 and also I'm not very skinny. I have (b) eyes
 and (sh) (b) hair.

Dan: My name is Dan and I'm from the United States.
I'm 28 years old and I work at a (h).

Task #4: Music Listening

(This CD was also found in the box!) This task was designed to help students develop inferencing skills as well as listening skills that could be applied to music listening outside of the classroom.

The mature learners tend to enjoy such artists as Pat Boone, Tony Bennet and the Carpenters— infinitely easier to understand than the musical preferences of many younger students, and thus creating a great opportunity to extend learning beyond the classroom. The activity focuses on activating semantic resources by first having students think about the theme of the song and predict vocabulary before listening. A Christmas song, of example, is apt to include words like *Santa*, *snow*, *present*, and *bells*. The students were put into pairs and asked to predict vocabulary that they might find in the song “Let’s Get Married.” They were given several minutes to elicit as many words and phrases as possible and then shared them with their classmates, collectively creating a corpus of thematically-related vocabulary that they might hear in the song. Taking the time to reflect on the theme and possible contents of the song prior to listening was found to result in significantly more active and focused listening.

When the song sheet was distributed, the students’ attention was drawn to [a] through [d]. The students were asked to turn to the context for grammatical clues about the deleted words and to jot down the grammatical categories in the margin. For example, since it follows the possessive pronoun *my*, students expected [b] to be a noun, and were able to suggest some possible words.

At this point, they were ready to listen. As a follow-up, students were asked to identify thematically-linked vocabulary in another English song of their choice.

LET'S GET MARRIED

Mariya Takeuchi

Now let's get married, no need to wait and waste () ()

Why do we have to carry on this way?

[a] can keep us apart

So let's get married right away.

I'll wake you up in the morning, my [b],

Sweeten your coffee () () ()

And, in the night, I will hold you so tightly

Whispering the words you long () ().

So let's get married

Why don't you [c] and stop hesitating?

Just think how happy we can be, you and me,

() () () () with a dog,

So let's get married right away.

When you are blue and so down, my baby,

I'll () () () to cheer you up.

But if I get sad and lonely,

Please hug me close and () () ().

So let's get married, I just don't know how to live without you.

Maybe it's nice to have [d] some day,

And this is all I can say,

Now let's get married, right away.

So let's get married right away.

So let's get married right away.

Task #5: "Super Challenge" Vocabulary Activity

When teaching French the instructor consistently stressed the importance of trying to identify French/English cognates in written text (the pronunciation differences between the two languages

render aural comprehension extremely challenging for most students.) The overlap in vocabulary between Japanese and English is also significant but the instructor chose to focus on guessing the meaning from context with her mature learners. To do so, at regular intervals during each of the three days of the course, a set of challenging vocabulary words was shown to the students. After ensuring that no one knew the meaning, sentences using the vocabulary items in context were shown. The students were put into pairs and asked to put on their thinking caps and try to determine the meaning of the vocabulary item(s) assigned to them. Billed as a “Super Challenge Brain Buster” this was a 10-minute activity that the students seemed to greatly enjoy. One set included the following:

1. Her tea was **tepid**, so she put it in the microwave.
2. The thought of eating a rat is **abhorrent** to most people.
3. The **podiatrist** told the woman to take the medicine for five days and call him if she didn't feel better.
4. Paul usually looks **unkempt**, but he had a very neat appearance at this job interview.

In some cases, such as #3 above, the students were able to determine the general category of the noun (i.e. some kind of doctor) which in many cases is good enough. When dealing with longer passages that degree of understanding often allows learners to create a place holder and move on.

Task #6: KonMari

This final task builds on the previous activity, using contextual clues to glean meaning. It also requires the students to apply their knowledge of the real world in some interesting ways. The article below, from the Bilingual Page of the *Japan Times* newspaper, is about a young Japanese woman who has become a household name not only in her own country, but a world-wide phenomenon. To begin this task, “KonMari” was written on the board and the students, in small groups, were given several minutes to brainstorm what they knew about her. Each group then received an enlarged

copy of the article and was given some time to figure out what it was about. To the horror of many, no vocabulary was pre-taught and dictionary use was not allowed.

Because they were familiar with the content and jazzed to be reading from an English-medium newspaper about a Japanese who has become famous overseas, motivation was high and the results were in fact very good. Unfamiliar vocabulary items such as *declutter*, *tidying up* and *contraction* were quite accessible from context, although several words such as *queen* in line three and the verb *hit* in line six were used in ways that were new to most of the students. Still, even the weaker students were able to determine the basic gist of the article, and the stronger groups could tell the whole story. This activity was carried out in the afternoon of the last day, at which point the students had become quite accustomed to having to rely on context and guesswork for meaning.

The English version of a Japanese book on how to declutter rooms has topped U.S. newspaper USA Today's weekly best-seller list. "It took 60 weeks, but Japan's Marie Kondo is finally queen of USA Today's Best-Selling Books list," the U.S. daily said on January 14th. The decluttering book, "The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up," was first published in Japan in December 2010 and its English edition hit U.S. bookstores in October 2014. More than 1.6 million copies have since been sold in the U.S. Kondo, better known as KonMari, a contraction of her full name, was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by Time magazine in April last year.

Pedagogical Considerations

To conclude, let me review some guidelines that have helped me to successfully add new inferencing tasks to the curriculum for mature students. First, the students participate more actively in guessing activities when they are allowed to work in pairs or small groups. While this is also true of younger learners, it is particularly important

for adults who have been away from English for many years and feel enormous pressure to pass the course in order to get their hard-earned degree. Secondly, introducing inferencing tasks at regular intervals from the first day of the program gives them a chance to warm up to the idea of leaving the old crutches behind and using what they know to predict meaning. Third (and the most challenging for me personally) is the need to allow sufficient time to carry out activities. Rushing can be counterproductive. And finally, these tasks should be a “fun” break from other classroom activities.

While they do require concentration, the tasks should be formulated at a level that will challenge but not threaten the majority of learners in the class. That requires careful selection of materials and also to the sequencing of questions and activities, with clear educational goals in mind.

Developing a repertoire of decoding skills that can be applied to new material in the target language is empowering for my mature students and hopefully helps them see that working with language can be enjoyable. When they learn to take risks, they often find that they know more than they think.

Sources and Materials

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