

Brainstorming Activities for “Reading Comprehension” of Materials on Japanese Society and Culture

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Keywords

reading comprehension, brainstorming, accomplishing tasks, varied perspectives

Summary

Simply put, brainstorming is an activity that enables a small group of individuals, interacting spontaneously, to come up with an assortment of ideas in order to achieve a certain purpose. In this paper, I will focus on the brainstorming activities for “reading comprehension” that I use in my class on “Multicultural Approach to Japanese Reading Comprehension,” activities through which students learn about Japanese society and culture. Brainstorming increases “reading comprehension” by helping students think creatively, so that they can gain knowledge and encounter opinions from a variety of perspectives. In this paper, I will present some concrete methods for brainstorming in order to show how brainstorming activities can be used in order to accomplish several tasks in a “reading comprehension” class.

1. Introduction

One of the classic problems in using group activities as a part of classroom work is that not all members within each group participate equally in its activities, such as discussion. In extreme cases, a single student monopolizes the discussion, while others blindly follow the leader. In the class I teach, “Multicultural Approach to Japanese Reading Comprehension,” students do reading exercises on Japanese society and culture. Then, in small groups, they discuss the contents and themes of the reading material, sharing the results of their discussions afterwards through group presentations. Finally, students further deepen their understanding through Q&A sessions. However, it has always been a problem that members of a group do not necessarily share interests, which results in less active participation by students who

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are not interested in the chosen reading topic.

As I searched for ways to encourage members of each group to find shared interests, engage in spontaneous discussions, and participate in activities to communicate their ideas, I came across the method of “brainstorming.” Originally, brainstorming was devised as a way to come up with creative ideas for business or design work, but I thought that this innovative method could be applied to Japanese language classes as well, and I devised ways to do so. Already in classes that teach English as a second language (ESL/EFL), increasing numbers of instructors are using brainstorming methods to teach speaking, writing, or other language skills.¹

In this paper, I will focus on ways in which the brainstorming method can be applied to classroom activities for “reading comprehension.” More specifically, I will discuss the brainstorming methods I applied to a specific topic (Japanese society and culture) in my own classroom.

2. Method of Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a form of group work and is a method for drawing and accumulating ideas spontaneously in a small group in order to achieve a task or a goal. Ellen Lupton says that brainstorming is an effective approach for creative thinking in order to explore different ideas. Lupton thinks that brainstorming helps to expand one’s range of creative thinking, and thus can lead to bringing focus to a problem at hand to find better solutions. Therefore, brainstorming quickly gained popularity in the 1950’s as an effective approach for creative thinking, and was proven to work for those who did not consider themselves to be creative thinkers.² Here, let us look at the characteristics of brainstorming used as a classroom tool. The term brainstorming was first coined by Alex F. Osborn, an advertising specialist in Madison Square Garden in the 1950s. He introduced this concept as a method for thinking creatively.³ Osborn gives the following four features of brainstorming:

- 1) During brainstorming, a person should not criticize or state opposing opinions. Opinions may be stated and judgments can be made, but later, during the period of reflection.
- 2) Unique or eccentric ideas should not be discarded.
- 3) The more ideas there are, the better. More ideas lead to better quality.
- 4) Ideas from different group members should be combined in order to produce more meaningful ideas.

A mind map may be used during the process.

In addition to the above four conditions presented by Osborn, I find it necessary to add a fifth: “strict

time management.” When a time limit is set for an activity, it generates a gaming effect, and participants become more actively involved in attaining the goal.⁴ For example, for group brainstorming, an instructor can allow participants approximately five minutes to come up with various ideas, ten minutes to summarize those ideas in a rough statement, and ten minutes to present them. Also, a time limit encourages participants to make quick decisions, which stimulates discussion, which in turn produces positive outcomes.

By fulfilling these five conditions, the characteristics of brainstorming become clear. It is not simply a way “to wrap up different ideas and opinions to draw a conclusion,” but rather, a method “to draw, accumulate and combine various ideas from simple to more creative and profound in order to examine the goal more closely and ultimately, to effectively reach an even more creative result.”

3. “Multicultural Approach to Japanese Reading Comprehension”: Summary of Class Content

3-1. The Purpose of “Reading about Different Cultures”

My “Multicultural Approach to Japanese Reading Comprehension” class consisted of “reading comprehension” exercises and the discussions that followed. These activities had two purposes.

- 1) To stimulate the students to think creatively by having them “brainstorm” during “reading comprehension.” Reading paragraphs or novels related to Japanese society and culture allows students to discover the similarities and differences between Japanese people and people in their home countries.
- 2) To give students a broader outlook on particular subjects. Rather than binding students to stereotypes, such as “People of such-and-such country are X,” brainstorming activities allow them to gain different perspectives and think more flexibly.

To be more exact, after each “reading comprehension” exercise, I assign students a creative group task: to make, produce, and present “skits” after their brainstorming sessions. As such, the ultimate purpose of this class is to promote understanding about Japanese society and culture from multicultural perspectives by having the students complete this final task.

3-2. Students

Re: students in the class:

- 1) There were approximately fifteen foreign students, who came from four different countries, including China, South Korea, England, and Australia. They were enrolled in short-term study abroad programs, ranging from six months to one year.⁵
- 2) The students’ level of language acquisition was intermediate or above (i.e., over 400 hours of total learning time). Students whose total learning time was less than 300 hours were exempted from this case study, since they lacked the necessary reading comprehension ability.
- 3) Since the students’ ability levels varied from intermediate to advanced, I designated at least one volunteer Japanese student to join each group. These students not only assisted the foreign students but also participated in the discussions on Japanese society and culture as much as the foreign students did. According to the foreign students, the fact that they were able to have a discussion for a shared purpose with Japanese students stimulated their interest and increased their motivation to learn.

3-3. Instructional Content of the Course

For the purpose of gaining various perspectives to promote the understanding of Japanese society and culture, the students were required to plan and create skits of approximately eight minutes in length for the final stage of the following learning process, and then perform them before Japanese guests:

- 1) Reading comprehension. In response to a request by the students, I selected short stories written by Kenji Miyazawa, Osamu Dazai, and Kyusaku Yumeno.⁶
- 2) Discussion. As a group activity to deepen their understanding, the students brainstormed and discussed the positive and negative features of Japanese society and culture that they learned from the reading comprehension exercises (See #1 above). Based on this discussion, the students decided on a theme and created a story, and then prepared several illustrations to depict the story.
- 3) Skit. The students completed eight-minute skits based on the tasks completed under #2 “Discussion.” Students created a script and props, and practiced acting their roles.
- 4) Performance. After rehearsing the skits several times, students performed it before Japanese guests at the farewell party.⁷

In this paper, by focusing on the “reading comprehension” practice described in #1 above, I will demonstrate the potential of brainstorming activities and show how students accomplished their assigned tasks in order to gain more diverse perspectives.

4. Brainstorming Activities for “Reading Comprehension”

In this section, I will bring up examples of classroom activities relating to “reading comprehension” of material related to Japanese society and culture as an example, in order to show the purpose of such activities and explain the procedures by which they are implemented. I will then discuss in detail regarding the actual brainstorming activities.

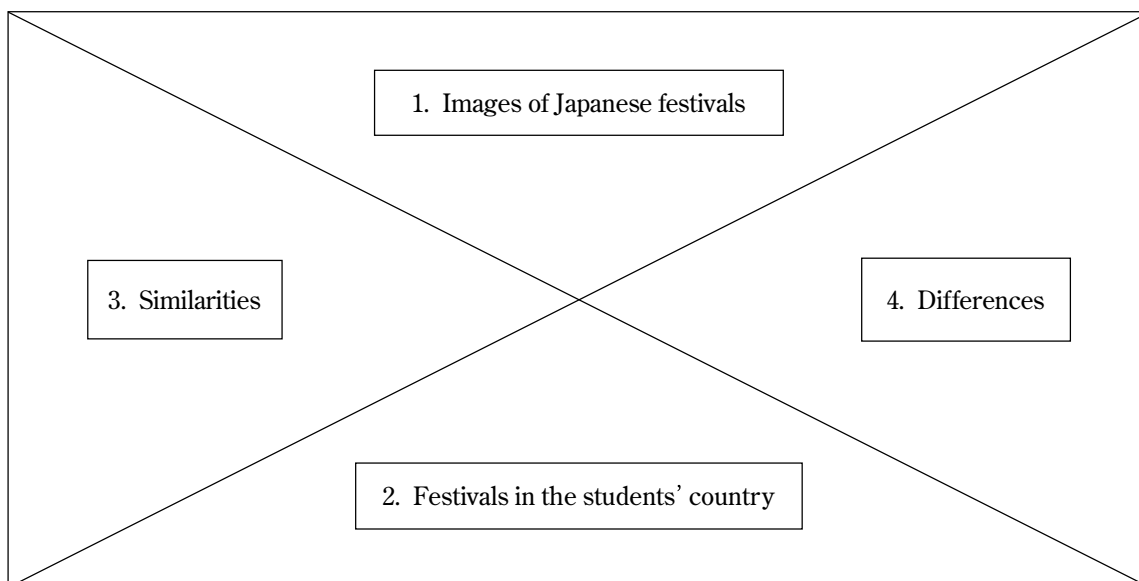
4-1. Purpose and Procedures

As I explained earlier, there were fifteen students from four different countries in my class. In the classroom, students first engaged in the comprehension of reading material related to Japanese society and culture. The purpose of this learning process was to stimulate the students’ creative thought processes through brainstorming. Through this method, students would then discover the characteristics, as well as similarities and differences, between the culture and ways of thinking of Japanese people and the people of the students’ home countries, and would gain new perspectives. I divided the students into four groups, and each group consisted of about four foreign students from multiple countries and at least one volunteer Japanese student. Each group selected a group leader. If necessary, a secretary could also be selected. Large-sized Post-it notes and if possible a whiteboard were needed for each group. If there were not enough whiteboards available, large cardboard papers or poster boards worked just as well.

4-2. Warm-up Exercise

As reading material for this lesson, I chose a short story by Kenji Miyazawa: “Matsuri-no Ban” (“Night of the Festival”). First, to warm-up students for the expected brainstorming, I selected three or four themes appropriate for “stimulating” the students’ creative thinking about the topic of the reading material. For example, for this reading material, I selected: 1) images of traditional Japanese festivals; 2) images or detailed explanations of festivals in the students’ home countries; 3) similarities and 4) differences between the festivals in Japan and in the students’ home countries. In the classroom, I showed the students the following category map and directed them to write down the four factors on the group’s whiteboard or poster board. I made it clear to the students that the purpose of this category map is to visualize the categories of information.

Diagram 1 Category Map 1



The purpose of this brainstorming activity was to make the students in each group share as many ideas and as much information with each other as possible within a limited amount of time, and then summarize and share this information with the entire class.

What follows is a detailed outline of the brainstorming procedure I used, expressed as a kind of abstract template that can be adopted or adapted by other instructors for their own use. The process is as follows: first, the instructor gives ten minutes to each group.⁸ Using this time, the students must write the answers to the four questions (information and knowledge) of the category map on the Post-it notes. The instructor must make sure that the students complete this task individually, without consulting others. When time is up, members of each group post their Post-it notes under the corresponding categories on the category map so that all members can share their information. It is important that all notes are posted even if some of the answers overlap, as it will reveal the answers shared by many students. The instructor must also tell the students that they can use illustrations and diagrams in order to facilitate better understanding when posting their answers. Afterwards, the students will work in a group. Taking approximately ten minutes, the students will exchange opinions with others in the group by referring to the information posted on the post-its. Next, each group's leader will help lead the group to categorize, organize, and complete a category map, taking about five minutes. The instructor gives another ten minutes for the students to prepare to present the result before the class. The instructor makes sure that each student must have a role in presenting the results. Finally, each group presents the result before the class, and the class shares through Q&A. By sharing the information, all the students in the class can

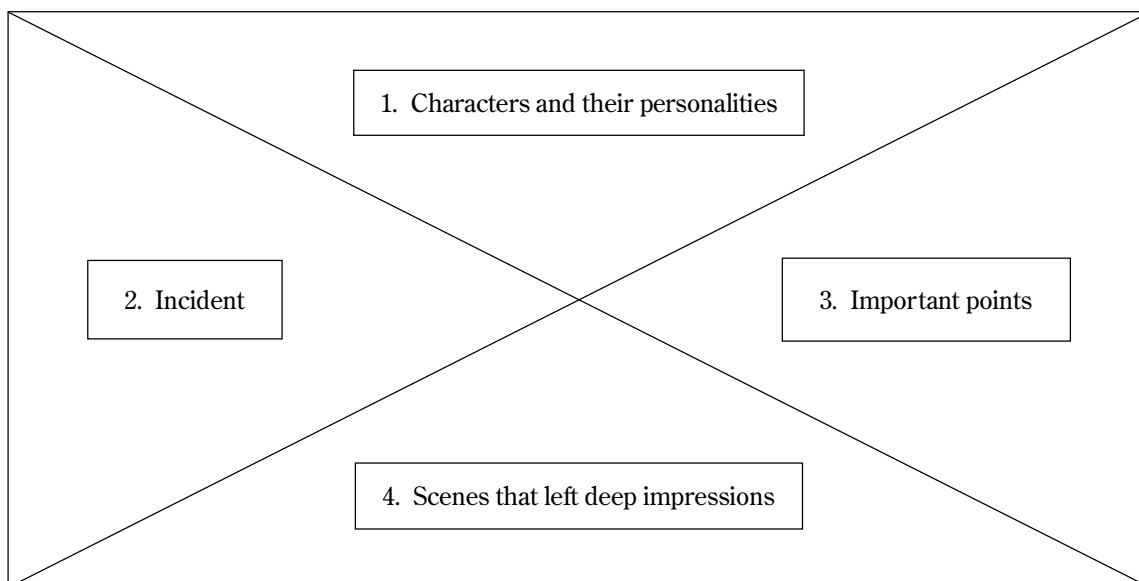
supplement their knowledge and information to prepare for the next step in learning, which is reading comprehension. To recapitulate the flow of brainstorming activity:

- 1) The students work individually to write down their information, knowledge, and opinions on a post-it note.
- 2) The students then work in groups. Members of each group exchange opinions as each student presents the content of his or her notes made during step #1.
- 3) Based on the opinions exchanged, the group leaders lead the students in creating a category map⁹ in order to summarize the opinions of their groups.
- 4) The students prepare to present the results of steps #3 and #4 before the whole class.
- 5) Finally, using their category map, the students present their opinions. Then, the class participates in a Q&A session to share information and knowledge. This basic flow of brainstorming as a warm-up exercise can be applied to any of the processes that I will discuss below.

4-3. Brainstorming activities for the reading comprehension process

Next, the students proceed to “reading comprehension.” Before engaging in the first process of reading comprehension, students must finish reading the entire story assigned for homework. Since the text is bilingual, students who are unfamiliar with Chinese characters may read the text in English if it is too difficult for them to read the text entirely in Japanese. In class, the instructor assigns different sections of the material to each group and determines four elements that are essential for “understanding the reading comprehension material,” such as: 1) the characters and their features, 2) the incidents that took place, 3) important factors, and 4) scenes or incidents that left a strong impression or were interesting. Then, the students will proceed to fill in the category map as given below, by following the same procedure as in the warm-up.

Diagram 2 Category Map 2



The purpose of this brainstorming activity is to help students “wrap up” the information taken from the section of reading assigned to them and then draw some meaning from it, so that they can present their interpretation of the story. Since this task may need more time than the previous warm-up exercise, the instructor needs to adjust the time given to the students according to the difficulty level of the reading or the amount of the material. At the end of the class, each group will post their category map in front of the class and present their results. By sharing their information with the entire class, all of the students can deepen their understanding of the story.

The instructor should then give the assignments to be completed before the next class, which will be the last stage of this exercise. That stage consists of: 1) reading the entire story one more time and 2) completing the reading comprehension drill sheet for detailed reading. By referring to the reading comprehension drill sheet, students will be able to read the assigned section in detail and complete the following 4 tasks: 1) Pick out the words or expressions that they do not understand and rewrite them using easier expressions in Japanese; 2) Come up with 5 or more questions (problems) about the assigned section; 3) Summarize the assigned section using 100 to 140 words; and finally, 4) Based on the previous classroom activities, summarize their personal opinions about the assigned section. The purpose of this reading comprehension sheet is to allow students to review and organize the information, impressions, and opinions presented in category map 2. By taking more time to read the materials closely by referring to category map 2, students can prepare for the last step of the reading comprehension exercise.

Diagram 3 Reading Comprehension Sheet

1. <Words and expressions you do not know> Refer to a dictionary and rewrite using easier Japanese.
e.g. : Koe-o hisomeru = To speak in a soft voice so that others won't hear you.

2. <Questions>List 5 questions that you find important or interesting (unique) about this story.
Example 1: Where in Japan do you think this story is taking place?
Example 2: Regarding line ____ of page ____, if you were this man, what would you do?

3. <Summary>Summarize the story using 100 to 140 words.

4. <Impressions>Write down your impressions and opinions.

4-4. Activities to Wrap up the Reading Comprehension Exercise

For the final class, the instructor distributes in advance, to each student, five stickers with a ○ mark. As a brainstorming activity, each student gives to other members of the group his or her answers to question 4, "Impressions", on the assigned reading comprehension drill sheet. This will last for 15 minutes. Then, each student, working individually, writes on a post-it note the five answers for question 2 of the reading comprehension drill, and sticks the note on the whiteboard or the poster board.

Next, students work as a group again by choosing the five best answers from all the answers on the post-it notes presented by each member of the group for 10-15 minutes. The students should choose the best answers by discussing the posted questions together. If there is more than one identical question, rearrange the post-it notes so that the identical questions will be next to one another, and count how many identical questions there are in total. This is because the more identical questions there are, the higher in priority of importance that question will be. Next, each member places the five ○ mark stickers on the post-it

notes with the questions that he or she found important. Through this process, the students select the five questions that have the most number of stickers. If any two questions have the same number of stickers, the whole class should discuss them together and select one of the two. Finally, the students should write down the final five questions in large letters on the whiteboard or the poster board.

Then, as a class activity, the instructor highlights the five questions presented by each group and asks students to answer those questions. Since the time required for this Q&A varies depending on the language acquisition level of the students, the instructor may need to allow more time for less-advanced students. Or, the instructor may ask each group to discuss the questions as a group, and come up with answers together.

After all the questions have been answered, one final group activity remains: The instructor brainstorms with students about “the points that the author wants to impress on readers the most.” Still working in groups, students prepare to present their opinions. When time is up, as the last step in the reading comprehension exercise, each group shares its conclusions with the class as a whole, and as a follow-up, class members participate in a Q&A session that deepens their understanding of the materials that have been read. If time allows, or as an optional activity, class members may also discuss the similarities and differences in their understanding or interpretation of the readings, which may relate to or differ from one another based on each student’s cultural background. In this manner, the instructor can promote multicultural understanding on the part of the students, thereby allowing them to achieve even more fully the primary purpose of reading comprehension.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the use of brainstorming as a learning tool and have explained how students in my reading comprehension class complete a specific task to fulfill a particular purpose, in order to achieve a better understanding of Japanese society and culture. Here, I would like to summarize the significance of brainstorming in language teaching.

As stated in section 2, brainstorming is a “method to complete a certain task by devising ideas spontaneously in a small group.” When applied to language classes, brainstorming can be defined as a process to “complete a task by exchanging opinions and ideas about a given topic.” It is essential for students to have sufficient knowledge and information about a given topic, and by providing them with a variety of reading comprehension materials, the instructor helps them gain the information and knowledge that they may not yet have. Only after completing this process can students gain “different perspectives” and “unique ways of thinking,” through which, in turn, they can be led to “new findings” and “unique opinions.”

Therefore, the ultimate role of brainstorming activities in reading comprehension classes is to promote this process.

For further consideration, I intend to pursue the question of how we can utilize the brainstorming method effectively and efficiently throughout the entire process of teaching about Japanese society and culture, and not only in “reading comprehension” but in the “discussion” of class materials as well. Also, I would like to investigate and utilize various brainstorming methods in “writing” and “speech presentation.”

Notes

- 1 Refer to, e.g., Hall Houston (2006), Hayriye Kayi (2006), Brian Cullen (1998), and Leslie Bobb-Wolff (1996).
- 2 *Mondai Kaiketsu-ga dekiru Dezain-no Hassoho*, 2012, p.4. This is a Japanese translation of *Graphic Design Thinking: Beyond Brainstorming* edited by Ellen Lupton, 2011.
- 3 For a detailed discussion of the concept of brainstorming see p.16 above.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.17.
- 5 At our institution, we enroll foreign students in the 1st term (April to early August) and in the 2nd term (October to early February). While most students remain for 1 year (two terms), some only enroll for a single term, either in the spring or fall.
- 6 Since it is impossible for students to read all of these works, I used selections from “J-Bungaku: Manga-de Yomu Eigo-de Ajiwau Nihon-no Meisaku Bungaku 12-hen” (“12 Masterpieces of Japanese Literature to Read in Manga and Understand in English”) by the J-Bungaku Seisaku Project, as well as other books that introduce Japanese society and culture from various perspectives. I extracted the important portions of each story and had students read the materials while engaging in brainstorming activities. Since some students had fewer total hours of learning and came from countries where Chinese Characters are not used, I tried to find books written both in English and in Japanese.
- 7 For a discussion of brainstorming activities from “discussion” to “skit-making,” as a way of promoting multicultural understanding, see Midori Indoh 2012.
- 8 The instructor needs to adjust the time limit given below according to 1) the students’ level of language acquisition; 2) whether the students are from countries where Chinese characters are used; and 3) the level of difficulty of the activities.
- 9 In addition to a category map, the instructor may allow the students to create a mind map, illustrations, graphs and tables, or story board for visual effects.

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