Automatic Reading Comprehension

You might have learned in school a few systems of reading comprehension. They all go by lovely acronyms like SQ3R, CSR and RTA. They are tried and true models of building good comprehension for readers in their native language.

For the most part they can really help you to understand a text quickly and answer those pesky comprehension questions at the end pretty easily as well. The problems start when you try to apply the models to foreign language. But, with a few modifications they can also work for Japanese reading comprehension.

So, let’s go over one of the more popular models, SQ3R, and see how it works for foreign language comprehension.

Before I start, I should say that this technique should help you out with the test at the N4 and above levels. However, it doesn’t hurt to know these techniques early on so that you can apply them to your studies early and get used to how it works and then you can scale it up as you get more advanced.

Steps to SQ3R

There are 5 steps to SQ3R – Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review. We will keep the main idea of each step, but for foreign language comprehension, we will need to change the nuts and bolts of each of these steps.

Just to clarify, try to use these first while practicing for the test (don’t try them out on a real test at first), and then after awhile this system will become pretty natural for you and you’ll just do it automatically whenever you read a text.

Also, for these first 4 steps, it is important to comprehend what you read, not increase your speed. We will work on that in the 5th step - Review. Right now make sure you are going through the steps and building up your comprehension even if it is pretty slow.

First Stop – Survey

In a lot of ways this is a bit more difficult to do for Japanese than English and in other ways it is a little easier to do. To start off, if this is a reading passage from a drill book or a practice test, read the questions for the passage first. These questions will, a lot of times, hint at the general meaning of the passage by pointing out key words and references in the text.

Don’t waste your time reading the answers though, it will slow you down and it might throw you off of the main meaning.

After the questions, very quickly scan through the text and see what kanji pop out. Do you see some of the same kanji? This can give you an idea of the main topic. Also make note of all the underlined parts of the passage these generally refer to something else, and are what the comprehension questions are usually about (at N4+). Then scan through the last paragraph or two sentences. This is where the main idea of a Japanese essay can usually be
found. It might not make a lot of sense at first though.

In general, don't spend much time during this phase. You might want to even time yourself to keep it from going too long.

**Second Stop - Question**

This is where you should ask yourself, what do I know about this subject? What kind of background information can I pull up to assist me? Be careful to not include popular opinions. On the test, they generally try to have essays that go against popular opinion or are sometimes just plain weird opinions. So don't let your opinion about a topic cloud your comprehension. Think about the background information that you know only.

**Third Stop – Reading**

This is the first R of the 3Rs and it is a big one. Here you'll be putting your automaticity skills to work as you speed through the text.

Go through the text paragraph by paragraph. Pay attention to 'road signs', basically connectors and references that point to or link to other parts of the passage. This is where really drilling the grammar will definitely help a lot because your brain will be wired to automatically recognize these patterns.

You might want to go so far as to mark up the text by circling and pointing to what the words reference or link to. Note that on the actual exam, writing a memo is prohibited, but they don't actually say writing is prohibited and I have several times marked up my passages without getting points taken off or my score dismissed. I'm not sure what is allowed and what isn't though so be careful.

**Fourth Stop – Recite**

After each paragraph, take a moment to try to summarize the main idea. At first, this can even be in your native language. The point here is to check to make sure you understood everything you just read and didn't just mindlessly go through it.

If there is a question about an underlined word in the paragraph be sure to answer it at this time. If you can't answer it easily, you'll need to go back and re-read the paragraph.

These last two Rs are where you'll start to get a feel for your true reading speed. If you are not able to comprehend the passage in a short period time, you will need to focus on building up your reading speed.

**Last Stop – Review**

In the original SQ3R system this involves taking notes and asking yourself questions about the text. But, of course, for learning a foreign language, you probably aren't really too concerned with remembering the substance of the reading. You are more concerned with learning how to read the passage.

**So, how do you practice that?**

Well, the answer is actually incredibly simple. Again, you want to
focus on making it automatic. You want to minimize the time it takes for you to look up words in your head and you want to be able to understand the text almost by instinct.

**You need automaticity.**

To do that you can practice re-reading the passage. Studies have shown that repetitive reading, reading the exact same text several times, can really help your reading comprehension. This technique actually helps more than extensive reading, which is where you read a lot of different easier to read texts.

I feel like the reason for this is because of automaticity. You start to get down the rhythm of the text and can internalize a lot of the patterns this way. The important thing here is to keep doing the first 4 steps of SQ3R while you are re-reading. Don’t blindly read the passage, but try to actively comprehend everything about it.

At this point, you will also want introduce some timing as well. You can time yourself and see if you can read the passage faster and faster. Make sure you are still doing it at a speed that you can comprehend the text, but push yourself to go faster.

You can actually start to feel the words and grammar points get clearer and clearer in your head until it becomes automatic for you. I’ve started using this technique on really challenging reading passages that I got a lot of the questions wrong for. It is amazing how only after a couple iterations the fog that was once there completely clears away.

**Put it To Work Today**

Take the time today or tomorrow to put this method to work. It only takes a few minutes to sit down and work your way through a text. You’ll find that the hardest part is getting started, after that you’ll start doing this every time you read a passage.

And once you get comfortable with this strategy, it WILL help increase your score on the test, so go get started today.