English Linguistics: Difficulties in English for Japanese EFL Learners

『英語学概論：日本人にとって英語が難しい理由』

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Abstract：This paper presents a summary of several of the major difficulties Japanese EFL learners face when learning English a second language. In particular, the influence of the L1 on L2 language learning is highlighted. Particular reference is made to language distance phonological, and lexical problematicity and the resulting effects on linguistic performance. It is recognized that although the teaching environment and the quality of teaching are often criticized as inferior, no acknowledgement is made of the real difficulties which exist in second language learning for Japanese learners.

Introduction

The difficulties faced by Japanese EFL learners in their acquisition of a second language need constant repeating to remind educators and learners themselves of the difficulties that exist in learning a foreign language (English in this case). Much has been made of the quality of English education in Japanese public schools, and the efforts to correct perceived weaknesses, which it is assumed, can be achieved through teacher-training, foreign language teachers, or increased assignments. However, realistic goals have to be achieved that acknowledge cultural and linguistic differences that contribute to the difficulty in acquisition of a second language. Rather than comparing intranational TOEIC scores among students at varying stages of language learning, more attention needs to address the underlying causes and contributing factors to Japanese EFL perceived weaknesses.

Language distance

Language distance refers to the 'structural closeness of languages' (Crystal, 1987, p. 371) or the similarity shared by different language systems. Quantative assessment has attempted to measure languages which share more features (lexically, typologically, phonologically, etc) from those which exhibit dissimilarity. However, it has proved controversial due to the number of variables involved, but also quantifying the numerous aspects which make up languages into quantitive, comparable form. Although intuitively Western European languages seem 'closer' to English (than say Japanese) proving measurements of this closeness is problemtaic. Langaue trees offer a diagramaitc form of language relationships and allow linguistics to trace the evoloution of languages. The potential to quantify the relationship offers the chance to anticipate diffulties for learners due to language dissimilarity or L1 intereference. In an attempt to triangulate language scores Hart-Gonzalez and Lindemann (1993) compare the language scores for different nationalities after the completion of foreign language training. The scores (see Table 1 below) can assist in the evaluation, and diagnostic analyses in understanding the determinants of English language proficiency among EFL learners of English. Although criticized as crude and unreliable, they

offer a cursory insight into manifested difficulties from learners from varying countries. More accurate assessment is required to reveal the underlying causes and influenceas to validate the findings, but as an oversight the data provides an interesting insight into differences in language systems.

The range is from a low score (harder to learn) of 1.00 for Japanese to a high score (easier to learn) of 3.00 for Afrikaans, Norwegian and Swedish. Japanese being the most distant, followed by Mandarin; then French and then Afrikaans, Norwegian and Swedish as the least distant. As the majority of the top-ten countires are European it is claimed that EFL learners from these countries would be expected to show quicker development due to language simmilarites than learners form Japan or Korea.

Segmental aspects: Phonologically related

Pronunciation difficulties can occur through the phonological transfer of sounds from the L1 into the L2. Well discussed variances between Japanese and English relate to the difficulty of pronunciation of phonological sounds which may not exist in either language.

Vowels: The Japanese vowel system includes only five vowels (compared to 15 for English including dipthongs). Difficulty producing English vowels that do not exist in a Japanese vowel system unused to vowel distinctions made by the change of tongue positioning between the five front and five back vowels of English (only two distinctions exist for Japanese vowels). Additionally, the English central vowels are not represented in the Japanese system which results in difficulty in distinguishing "hut",

Table 1: Index of Difficulty of Learning a Foreign Language (Language Scores) and Codes for Languages Reported in the U.S. Census

Language Direct Codes 1990, 2000	Censuses Close Codes 1990 Census	Changes for 2000 Census	Language Score
1. Afrikaans	611	612	3.00
2. Danish	615	621	2.25
3. Dutch	610	622	2.75
4. French	620	623	2.50
5. German	607	624	2.25
6. Bulgarian	647	608	2.25
7. Burmese	717	609	2.00
8. Czech	642	613	2.00
9. Finnish	679	680	1.75
10. Greek	663	665	1.75
11. Hebrew	726	729	1.75
12. Hindi	674	675	1.75
13. Cambodian	645	655	1.75
14. Nepali	639,	640	1.50
15. Polish	720	725	1.50
16. Russian	691	690	1.75
17. Thai	689	690	1.50
18. Turkish	690	690	1.50
19. Vietnamese	692,	695	1.25
20. Arabic	719	720	1.25
21. Mandarin	625	630	1.25
22. **Japanese**	654	650	1.00
23. Korean	685	685	1.00
24. Cantonese			1.00

Note: Language Codes in this table are from *1990 United States Census of Population and Housing, Technical Documentation* and from *2000 United States Census of Population and Housing, Technical Documentation.*

Table 2: Vowel Charts

-English-

	front	central	back
high	i ɪ		u ʊ
mid	e ɛ	ʌ ə e	o ɔ
low	æ	a	

-Japanese-

	front	central	back
high	i		u
mid	e		o
low		a	

"hat", and "hot".

The numerical difference is compounded by the way vowels are pronounced differently in English. A distinction between lax and tense vowels is made according to how much muscle tension or movement in the mouth is involved in producing vowels (Ladefoged, 1982). English vowels requiring additional muscle application (tense) contrast from those which can be produced with minimal tension (lax). The combination of unfamiliar mouth contortions in addition to unfamiliar sounds compound to present difficulty for Japanese learners of English.

Consonants: Noticeable differences also exist in consonantal distributions, with English also containing more consonants than Japanese. A more prevelant distinction lies in the unique distribution patterns of consonants in both languages with English a wider, more diverse range which includes consonant clusters. For example, the lack of a Japanese /v/ sound means the voiced bilabial stop /b/ for /v/ is substituted in its place. This can result in confusion when words such as 'very' are pronounced. This problem also extends to the /r/ and /l/ difference and resulting words which prove difficult to pronounce. Word clusters result in the insertion of vowel sounds (vowel epenthesis) between the consonants resulting in the 'Katakana pronunciation' which can affect many beginners of English. For example, the 'str' consonant cluster would become 'sutora' resulting in /sUtOraberry/ to conform to the Japanese open syllable pattern (CV-CV).

The absence of a particular sound results in the substitution of that sound from the learner's L1 sysem. In the case of /r/ or /l/ the consonant is unavailable in Japanese so is substituted with the liquid sound similar to both English /r/ and /l/, but which does not exactly correspond to either of the English liquids and are often pronounced in-between the sound of the English /r/ and /l/. The interchangeable of the usage results in common difficulty which results in native speakers of English having difficulty in distinguishing between, for example, a Japanese learner's pronunciation of 'rice' and 'lice'. Another problem that comes from the lack of particular consonants in Japanese but which exist in English is the pronunciation of labiodental

Table 3: Classification of consonants according to place and manner of articulation -Japanese-

Place of Articulation / Manner of Articulation		Bilabial	Alveolar	Alveopalatal	Velar	Glottal
Stops	Voiceless	p	t		k	
	Voiced	b	d		g	
Fricatives	Voiceless	ɸ	s	ç		h
	Voiced		z			
Nasals		m	n			
Liquids (Approximants)			r			

fricative /v/. While Japanese has a similar voiceless counterpart of /v/ sound, it is a bilabial fricative, not a labiodental as in English. Because of the particular lack of /v/ sound Japanese learners often substitute the voiced bilabial stop /b/ for /v/. This strategy of substitution might cause some miscommunication between Japanese students and native speakers of English; for instance, such words as "vanilla" and "very" might be wrongly perceived as "banana" and "berry".

Suprasegmental aspects: word stress

Suprasegmental aspects of the English sound system such as rhythm, stress, and intonation are often distinguished from the segmental aspects such as consonants and vowels discussed earlier. They differ from those of Japanese in many respects

Stress: Stress-timed languages (English) tend to stress syllables at regular intervals, regardless of the number of unstressed syllables in the sentence (Ladefoged, 1982). The time it takes to pronounce a sentence will depend on the number of syllabus stressed, and not the total of syllabus in the sentence. Japanese speakers' pronunciation of English words and sentences may sound staccato-like to the native speakers' ears, and this particular type of rhythm can adversely affect the comprehensibility of their English to the native speakers. In contrast, syllable-timed languages (Japanese) syllables occur at regular interval of time so the time it takes to pronounce depends on the number of syllabus in total rather than which are stressed or not. The change in stress can also result in an alteration in the meaning of the sentence, for example:

-**My** mother is kind.
-My **mother** is kind.
-My mother **is** kind.
-My mother is **kind**.

Although EFL learners may be grammatically familiar with a structure, how stress can alter the meaning is problematic.

Conclusion

As is evident from the difference between Japanese and English the potential for negative L1 influence is exacerbated due to the relative 'distance' between the two languages. Particularly relating to pronunciation variances the number and type of sounds ensure L1 phonological transfer and problems for Japanese EFL learners. These differences must therefore be recognized by learners as prominent and a clear reflection of the difficulty. Conscious raising of the particular issues Japanese learners face will help leaners first of all recognize the real difficulties they face and thereby reducing the lack of motivation which manifests due to a perceived lack of linguistic improvement.

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