PRIOR LANGUAGE LEARNING: AN ADVANTAGE WHEN LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE?

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ABSTRACT

International students are seriously disadvantaged by having to learn a foreign language through the medium of another imperfectly mastered foreign language. The frequency and type of errors made in written texts by Australian students whose mother tongue is English with a comparable cohort of Chinese students whose mother tongue is a dialect of Chinese and who lack a near-native level of competence in English, are examined to assess this. The frequency and type of syntactic errors are compared for the two cohorts of students. The data are derived from the written components of the end of the year test administered to first year students of Japanese at one of Melbourne's universities. The texts are analysed within the framework of interlingual interference, intralingual interference, developmental and induced categories.

INTRODUCTION

This research is motivated by a concern voiced by a number of educators that international students, the majority of whom come from non-English speaking backgrounds, are seriously disadvantaged in competing for high grades with Australian students. According to a study on international students in the Australian academic environment, language difficulties were ranked as the most acute problem by both the surveyed students and the teaching staff [8]. Exposure to social and educational environments vastly different from those of their homelands adds further dimensions to the problems international students are experiencing in the course of their studies in Australia [1]. The Chinese learner and their paradoxical use of rote learning has been the subject of individual study in relation to particular learning styles [9]. Cultural differences are seen to contribute to variation in approaches to learning which are then seen to lead to qualitatively different learning outcomes [12; 15]. Teaching staff often express concern that international students are seriously disadvantaged in having to learn a foreign language through the medium of another imperfectly mastered foreign language. The main objective of this research therefore is to test the validity of these concerns through comparative evaluation of syntactic errors in written texts produced by a selected sample of Australian (native speakers of English) and Chinese students. Chinese students were chosen as the representative sample of the majority ethnic cohort within the international student population. Although emanating from a broader study [3] this investigation is limited to the identification and evaluation of errors in students’ usage of a set of postpositional morphemes, commonly referred to as particles, which in Japanese serve to identify the function of nouns in a sentence. The errors are examined within the framework of interlingual, intralingual, developmental and induced error categories, as defined in the relevant reference literature [8] as the basis for ascertaining whether Chinese students have greater acquisition problems than their Australian counterparts and whether these problems, if any exist, can be attributed to the lack of native-speaker competence in English.

METHODOLOGY

This research is based on data derived from the written components of an end of second semester final test administered to students completing the beginners' stream Japanese 1 program at Swinburne University of
Technology offers two separate Japanese language streams: the beginners' and the advanced stream. The beginner students commenced the study of Japanese at the same zero point of competence, were taught by the same teachers and exposed to the same teaching strategies meant their performance offered a more valid basis for comparative evaluation than that of the advanced cohort whose level of competence in the language varied significantly upon entry into the course, and whose prior knowledge was acquired from a variety of sources and through a variety of methodologies. \(^1\) Thirty students, fifteen Australian (A) \(^2\) and fifteen Chinese (C) were ultimately selected as the sample. The age distribution of the sample was only slightly different in the two respective cohorts. The two cohorts are comparable in gender distribution in that the females predominate in each, which is consistent with the commonly met distribution in Japanese language courses at Australian universities \(^3\). The A cohort is composed entirely of Australians whose mother tongue is English, and who do not speak, read or have ever formally learnt a foreign language while in contrast, the C cohort is composed of students of Chinese ethnic background, whose native tongue is a dialect of Chinese \(^3\) and who have formally learnt at least one foreign language, in this case English. High achievers on the one hand and poor performers who could not achieve 60% on the other were excluded from the sample on the grounds that lack of substantial numbers of errors in the output of the former and too many developmental errors in the output of the latter might skew the results of this investigation. None of the sample, irrespective of the cohort, have ever studied Japanese, or been exposed to the Japanese language through extended contact with native speakers of Japanese in Japan or elsewhere before enrolling in the present course. This selection highlighted some important differences in language acquisition processes between the monolingual Australians and the bilingual/multilingual Chinese students.

Written rather than oral output was used in the analysis and motivated mainly by two factors. Firstly, research on errors carried out to date in Japan, in contrast to studies by the Western scholars who tended to focus more on the spoken language, \(^4\), has been predominantly centred on data derived from written texts thus providing the necessary background against which the findings of this investigation can be tested. Furthermore, as research on comparative evaluation of syntactic errors made in written texts by Australian and Chinese learners has been largely neglected to date, this research can contribute valuable data to this promising field of inquiry. Particles are an extremely complex feature of the Japanese language as evidenced by the very large body of literature and the still ongoing debate amongst Japanese linguists as to the syntactic and semantic considerations which govern their distribution \(^14; 16; 17\). However, for the purpose of this investigation, particles are looked at from the point of view of the beginner learner, that is in their primary role of marking the grammatical subject, direct object and indirect objects of basic sentences. The frequency of errors per text per student and subsequently per A and C cohort was calculated against the total number of occurrences of the specific postpositional morphemes necessary to formulate grammatically correct sentences. The errors were then categorised and discussed within the framework of the interlingual, intralingual, developmental and induced types \(^8\) and the frequency of occurrence of each type was compared for the A and C cohorts. The main objective of the research presented in this paper was to establish, on the basis of errors in the written work of Australian and Chinese students, whether the latter are disadvantaged by having to study a foreign language through the medium of another, imperfectly mastered, foreign language. The secondary objective was to categorise and compare the errors identified in the data with the findings of other relevant studies.

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\(^1\) V.C.E. only: V.C.E. and a period of study in Japan on exchange.
Exchange only: working - holiday in Japan, etc.

\(^2\) The term Australian for the purpose of this research is applied to monolingual students whose mother tongue is Australian English.

\(^3\) The C cohort students are also formally educated in Mandarin Chinese.
RESULTS

Beginner learners appear to acquire the rules governing the obligatory marking of grammatical subjects and direct objects with relative ease but find some difficulties in selecting the appropriate particles. A comparison of errors was undertaken between the two cohorts (A and C) of students, as per Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>WP Total Errors</th>
<th>OP Total Errors</th>
<th>Total Errors per Total Occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Number % 37 49.3</td>
<td>Number % 37 49.3</td>
<td>% 74 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Number % 24 47.1</td>
<td>Number % 27 52.9</td>
<td>% 51 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Occurrences: 195 TE: Total Errors

On the basis of the results of this study, there are grounds to dispute the assertions made in some of the particle-focused investigations (eg. [5; 17]) that particle errors are caused largely by mother tongue interference. The findings of this research suggest that interlingual interference, if present at all, is only of marginal influence. Most of the errors identified in this research, similarly to the findings of [6; 7; 10], appear to be of the intralingual or developmental type. These results tend to support Buteau’s observation that interlingual interference is not the main cause of difficulties in foreign language acquisition [2]. The findings of this investigation suggest that the Chinese students appear to have had significantly less difficulties than the Australian cohort in mastering at least the particle aspect of the Japanese syntax. The percentage figures for the WP (A: 49.3%; Ch: 47.1%) and OP (A: 50.7%; Ch: 52.9%) errors are practically identical which suggests that, irrespective of ethnic background and/or competence in English, the Australian students and their Chinese peers experience acquisition problems in very similar areas and deal with the perennial learners’ problem of correct particle usage in a very similar way. The figures for the total number of errors identified in the data indicate also that the Chinese students experience significantly less difficulties in the acquisition of particles than their Australian counterparts (A: TE 38.5%; C: TE 26.2%). Bearing in mind the syntactic similarities between English and Mandarin Chinese, it can be assumed that the degree of difficulty in particle acquisition was practically the same for both cohorts of students in the sample. However, unlike their Australian peers, the Chinese students have had prior experience in learning a foreign language. It can be argued therefore that any disadvantage of learning Japanese through the medium of English is more than compensated for by other factors such as perhaps better developed learning strategies and better study habits, which have to be investigated in greater detail before meaningful comparisons can be made. For instance, the findings of a study on learning strategies employed by beginner learners of Japanese at Melbourne universities show a statistically significant difference between the learning techniques of the Asian and Australian (non-Asian) learners [11]. An overall higher performance record of the Chinese students is noted as one of results of another study on the same student population [13]. Consequently, it can be postulated that a definite relationship between prior foreign language studies and the subsequent acquisition of another foreign language exists and should be taken into consideration in investigations like the one undertaken in this research.

A full list of references is available on request from the authors.