Syntactic Priming by Japanese EFL Learners in Dialogue Contexts based on Different Task Types

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Abstract

Most Japanese EFL (English as a foreign language) learners have acquired certain levels of knowledge of English in terms of vocabulary, collocation, and grammar, while in real-time comprehension and production tasks, their performance drops markedly, showing that they have not achieved automatization in utilizing their knowledge of the language. We are conducting a series of studies to verify what types of interactions will help students achieve better automatization and performance in real-time tasks. In this paper, we report on results and plans of several studies to investigate the degree of syntactic priming in different types of tasks where the students are expected to complete certain tasks and/or keep the conversational ball rolling.

1 Introduction

According to the Interaction Hypothesis, pair and/or group activities among interlocutors with different levels of fluency are useful for second language acquisition. This does not always hold, however, among L2 / FL learners (Long, 1996). With the increase in communication-oriented activities in English language classes in Japan, we need to verify which types of tasks and procedures are effective in enhancing learner proficiency.

In a series of studies, we investigate syntactic priming (Bock, 1986), i.e., the tendency for speakers to produce a particular syntactic structure (as opposed to an equally acceptable structure) after recent exposure to that structure, in different types of tasks where the students should complete certain tasks and/or keep the conversational ball rolling.

2 Monologue Studies Completed (So Far)

We started a series of syntactic priming experiments with Japanese EFL leaners in monologue contexts based on a scheme as described in Pickering and Branigan (1998). The results of our earlier studies (e.g., Morishita, Satoi, & Yokokawa, 2010; Morishita, 2011) suggest that, overall, Japanese EFL learners with medium or higher English proficiency tend to be sensitive to syntactic structures and use the previously experienced sentence structure in a strategic way, while those with lower English proficiency lack the grammatical knowledge to construct correct sentences with those structures.

It was also found that syntactic representation in the mental lexicon of Japanese EFL learners is shared between spoken and written production (e.g., Morishita, 2011) and that repeated exposure to a certain syntactic structure accelerated learning in the course of syntactic priming experiments (e.g., Morishita, 2012).

3 Dialogue Studies Completed (So Far)

In Morishita (2013), Japanese EFL learners and L1 English speakers participated in scripted interaction tasks based on a scheme presented in Branigan, Pickering, and Cleland (2000). The results show that, overall, L1 English speakers used the same structures as those produced by their partners significantly more than Japanese EFL learners did, unlike the results of previous studies using sentence completion tasks in the case of prepositional object (PO) and double object (DO) structures. This might be because the interaction tasks required the exchange of information (i.e., meaning) and the construction of syntactic structures at the same time. Such tasks might have put a higher cognitive load on Japanese EFL learners, who lack automaticity in sentence processing.

In Morishita (2014), university students with elementary-level English proficiency were given a spot-the-difference task, where they formed pairs and alternately asked questions to find the differences in the pictures presented to them. We found that the participants were not able to produce question forms quickly and accurately in this kind of dialogue contexts. They were also rarely influenced by the utterances of their partners in terms of sentence-level production. The results show that if the students simply carry out this kind of activities, there is little possibility of implicit learning of correct or higher level of question forms. This suggests that we should develop effective tasks and their procedures based on syntactic priming, which leads to implicit learning of syntactic rules for language production.

4   Current Ongoing and Further Studies

Our most recent study focuses on transcriptions and other observations based on short interviews with Japanese university students spending three weeks in a short-term study abroad program. The students produced only 4 to 5 questions on average, compared with 16 to 17 questions by the first author in dialogues that continued for about 20 minutes. Again, the rather limited number of wh-question sentences made it difficult to locate effects of syntactic priming.

According to the Alignment Theory (Pickering & Garrod, 2004), interlocutors reach a mutual understanding of a situation by aligning their representations at all linguistic levels. The idea of how to utilize these effects of interaction for improving English proficiency, however, has not been shared so far in the field of English education in Japan. Therefore, we will further focus on syntactic priming in dialogue contexts.

We are currently planning to conduct the following experiments to examine; 1) how priming effects occur and accelerate in spontaneous conversations between Japanese EFL learners and L1 English speakers, 2) how priming effects change in the course of scripted interaction tasks between Japanese EFL learners and L1 English speakers, and 3) how the students learn more accurate and/or complex language use, focusing on the exchange of questions and answers in the classroom activities.

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