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Comparing L3 Acquisition: A Pilot Study

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The aim of this paper is to provide a pilot study for comparing the ease of learning of second foreign languages. The writer briefly presents a pilot study, discusses its preliminary results, and provides necessary background and justifications and proposes required improvements before concluding with remarks on the relevance of such a study for 2FL choice, learning, and research.

この論文は、第二外国語学習の平易さを比較する上で案内役となる研究を提供することを目的としている。そこで、(2)この案内役となる研究を手短に紹介し、(3)その予備結果を検討し、(4)引き続いて理解するために必要な情報をもたらし、(5)第二外国語を選択するための研究との関連性を結論付ける前にそこに要求される改善策を提案する。

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide a pilot study for comparing the “ease” of learning of second (or subsequent) foreign languages (2FL=L3). The writer briefly presents a pilot study, discusses its preliminary results and provides necessary background and justifications, and proposes required improvements before concluding with remarks on the relevance of such a study for L3 choice, learning, and research.

2. A pilot study: Comparing 2FL learning

2.1. Ease of learning and pragmatic abilities

The number of learners of German as 2FL at Japanese universities has decreased considerably (Gad 1995, Kondo 1999). Reasons for this decline include abolished course requirements (Reinelt 1993) and a folk-linguistic notion of language difficulty. This raises the question: Are other 2FLs easier? If so, what makes them easier?

Learners soon get a feeling for language difficulty, but research on the subject is conspicuously missing (Reinelt 2001 for an overview), especially in the case of L3.

For our pilot study we started with the following operational definition for the comparison of ease of 2FL language learning:

Generally, if L3x is easier to learn than L3y, then learners should show higher achievement in L3x than in L3y according to comparable criteria.

Since recent 2FL coursebooks (in Japan), despite all their language-specific differences, share a limited number of communicative goals (including acquisition of specific

pragmatic abilities, such as introducing oneself, asking and giving information etc), theoretically we can compare learning across languages.

The author was able to gain the cooperation of 3 foreign lecturers (Chinese, French, and German with 57, 41 and 33 students respectively) at Ehime University for a pilot study comparing their students' progress in the pragmatic skills covered in each course by the seventh week of the summer term 2000. For demonstration purposes, one part of the research is presented below (2.2.).

2.2. Asking for information

In the context of a longer test (Reinelt 2003), students were required to ask for the general location of a well-known tourist attraction.

While the question part (demonstrated below) was given only in the target language, the answer was also provided in Japanese, so there could be no misunderstandings. The students had to correctly finish the initial utterance and then answer the question on a blank line.

Table 1: Starter completion and information question

Japanese hint: 済みません、大阪のUniversal Studiosはどこですか?
(Excuse me, where is Universal Studios in Osaka?)

| |
|---|
| Exc _____, _____ les Universal-Studios d'Osaka? |
| 4Dui _____, 4da2ban de Universal Studios _____? |
| Ent _____, _____ Universal Studios in Osaka? |

The teachers were then asked to grade the answer variations using a scale from 1 to 5. Inter-rater reliability was not checked (see teaching-reality requirement in 4.1.)

3. Results and discussion

For technical reasons, the number of participating students varied considerably. Also, because of differences in teaching methods and grading, averages are the most we can get. Any further calculation would be over-interpreting the data. The results are valid only for the classes and term tested.

Table 2: Results for Chinese, French and German

| L3 | N | A | Sd | X |
|---------|----|----|--------|--------|
| Chinese | 57 | 26 | 1.9171 | 2.6538 |
| French | 41 | 31 | 1.5651 | 1.8709 |
| German | 33 | 14 | 2.2089 | 2.5714 |

Kruskal-Wallis Statistic KW = 2.149

p = 0.3414 (non significant)

(N=total nr. of students in the test, A=students who answered)

There were no statistically significant differences between the L3 scores, indicating that German was no harder than the other two languages. Conspicuously, many students (21 out of 57 for Chinese, 10 out of 41 for French, 19 out of 33 for German) did not respond at all. This complicates the data analysis, and can be taken as a reason to replicate this pilot study.

As an aside, the results for both Chinese and German indicate that the phrases to be entered are of an either/or nature in these two languages, while some variation seems to be acceptable in French.

Finally the results were returned to the teachers as feedback and for comparison.

4. Putting the pilot study into perspective: Background and justifications

With no known predecessor to this research in the realm of 2FLs, all parts (including the results) of this pilot study have to be put into perspective.

While investigating motivation and course and teacher images in questionnaires is relatively easy, the results usually have limited relevance in the reality of the classroom. Student motivation is not at all stable, and may change considerably.

For example, very few learners are ready to put effort into learning a 2FL (beyond *Ich liebe dich, je t'aime* and *ni hao*) where “fun” and “success” are not immediate. According to Yamamoto (2002), after an initially good impression, German students change their motivation if learning is not fun. (see Yamamoto 2002 for an interesting calculation on this matter, based on Kondo 1999).

4.1. Teaching situation background

In order to keep the study as close and relevant to present teaching reality as possible, the *teaching-reality requirement* was requested by all teachers who cooperated in the study:

Top priority has to be given to the unchanged actual reality of the learning situation in first year 2FL courses, since this is what

students experience and what they will tell their *kohai*, the next (or later) years’ students in the same major.

Intervention for testing reasons has to be as restricted as possible. Accordingly, it is impossible to account for differences in teaching approaches. Neither is it possible to introduce an “objective” scoring system which the teachers are not familiar with.

4.2. Justifications

While top priority is given to the unaltered teaching situation with all its “incomparables” such as different teaching methods, different textbooks, idiosyncratic test-making and -scoring and of course different subjects, justification for such research is required. Although the approach in this pilot study contradicts most statistical approaches, it is justified for the four following reasons:

Two external justifications come from the students themselves and from the university as an institution:

- 1) Weight of courses
The university grants the same amount of credits to all 2FL courses, whatever approaches a teacher takes or however he grades his/her class.
- 2) Learner background
Generally speaking, the situation in Japan is especially well-suited for such comparative research, since students in one group/ class or even year share a high number of characteristics:
 - similar school system,
 - often similar or same majors in class,
 - similar previous FL learning experiences
 - same age range

- to some degree even similar levels of ability as measured by entrance examinations to the university.

Learning situation internal justifications come from:

- 1) An equal starting position
All students start equally in the same new learning situation: At least at Ehime University, all students have to take a 2FL as underclassmen. All such L3 courses are first year beginners courses, which are fundamentally different from college EFL (Hammarberg 2001, Hufeisen 1998).
- 2) Comparable pragmatic skills covered in the courses
Recently most university 2FL courses have as one of their aims the teaching of certain “pragmatic” skills which are, essentially, common to all languages. This can be easily seen by comparing the lists of teaching goals in course books across different 2FLs. Of course, due to the characteristics of each language, these textbooks will differ considerably at intermediate levels.

Interviews with each teacher confirmed what contents had actually been covered and therefore could be included in the pilot study.

4.3. Frame work for the pilot study

4.3.1. Finding similarities

The following can be considered “similarities”:

What can be compared is the learning of linguistic items (such as telephone numbers) in combination with the abilities for performing linguistic actions with them (e.g. asking and giving them), i.e. pragmatic abilities. As mentioned in 4.2. above, the textbooks for different 2FL all differ completely in the first few lessons and considerably until e.g. week 6 or week 8, but the targeted pragmatic abilities are quite similar, including: asking questions, giving information, introducing someone or self, expressing consent or dissent, etc. Of course, the order of introduction may depend on the language, the teaching method, etc.

As similar contents are treated in one language and perhaps in another a little later, they become minimally comparable. A wider range of items across L3 courses is shared to justify any “testing” in a Japanese university term by probably the 7th week, when usually the first half of a term is over. With all precautions valid, how much was indeed covered and the learning progress of the students can be compared. Seen across languages, we would then be comparing the shared pragmatic course content.

4.3.2. Treatment in class before the “test”

Three introductory courses, one each of French(F), Chinese(C) and German(G), are held. Students are then tested after seven

weeks. While much content particular to each of these languages will be taught, similar content between languages will also appear. Question words are learned in week x in C, but not yet in F and G. In the next week, the same question words are introduced in the F course, while they are already repeated and used in questions in the C class. The G classes have not yet touched this theme. In the following week, the F class does not yet embed the question words in practical uses, while in the G course the question words are both learned and practiced in context. Now, G and C are almost identical in that both of their students have learned the question words as well as an important application, although of course not to the same degree.

One more week and F will be on a par with C and G, although some training time may be necessary. In the future, the F will also deal with this matter two more times, although with probably different progress. At the end of this part, a different step should be reached (Pienemann n.d.). This can be demonstrated as in Table 3:

Table 3 Flow of shared parts in intermediate phases across 2FLs

| Week | Contents: | F | D | C |
|------|----------------------|-----------|------------------|---------------|
| x | vocabulary, grammar | | | words |
| x+1 | location expressions | words | questions | |
| x+2 | question words, | | words, questions | |
| x+3 | questions | questions | | |
| x+4 | | | | _____ = _____ |
| x+5 | | | _____ = _____ | |

Note that the actual teaching schedule in the term considered may have deviated somewhat from the details of the flow chart.

5. Conclusion

First year students at universities in Japan heed advice from their seniors about course instructors, and opt for courses and languages which do not have a difficult image (Oebel 2001) or are easy to pass (Kondo 1999). In an initial effort to measure ease of learning, results from Chinese, French and German classes were compared. After seven weeks of instruction, no differences were found between foreign language courses when comparing the acquisition of pragmatic skills.

In order to improve comparisons across 2FLs, the research methods have to be refined gradually. Long-term studies have to be conducted to guarantee validity beyond the classes considered in this pilot study. This will then enable comparisons with other language acquisition research.

The present paper introduced a pilot study attempting at providing foundations for comparing L3 acquisition. If such research is conducted across several languages, in more combinations, but with similar comparisons, a new research discipline may be established: Comparing L3 (or higher) acquisition.

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