

LEARNING STRATEGIES BY JAPANESE STUDENTS OF EFL

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Abstract

Taylor (1975) hypothesizes that, in the early stages of language learning, the learner makes a greater proportion of transfer errors than the learner in advanced stages. As his knowledge about the target language increases, the proportion of transfer errors decreases and that of overgeneralization increases. His hypothesis was confirmed by a study of native Spanish speakers. The purpose of the present study was to find out whether overgeneralization or transfer strategy is more dominant among native Japanese speakers and also to investigate whether or not Taylor's hypothesis can be confirmed by native Japanese speakers. This study found that 42% of errors were due to overgeneralization, and 58 % to transfer. This indicates that transfer may be a dominant force in the Japanese learner's language development. The results of this study support Taylor's finding that overgeneralization and transfer errors are not qualitatively different for different levels of learners but are quantitatively different. Also, the present study corresponds to Taylor's findings which show that "reliance on overgeneralization is directly proportional to proficiency in the target language, and reliance on transfer is inversely proportional." (1975) However, in the present study, transfer was the dominant strategy

for all levels of subjects, although the degree of reliance on it decreased as the learner's proficiency increased.

INTRODUCTION

There has been an increasing amount of speculation recently about the role of native language interference in second language acquisition. Recent studies tend to claim a weakness in any transfer-based theory of errors. For instance, Dulay and Burt (1974) note that only 4.7% of errors made by children are due to native language interference and 87.1% of errors are due to overgeneralization. In addition, Taylor (1975) conducted a study to investigate how overgeneralization and first language transfer are used in second language learning, and the relationship between the errors due to these two learning strategies. His study was on adult native Spanish speakers. Taylor hypothesizes that, in the early stages of language learning the learner depends more frequently on his native language and makes a greater proportion of transfer errors than the learner in advanced stages. As the learner's knowledge about the target language increases, he will depend less frequently on native language and the proportion of transfer errors decreases while the proportion of overgeneralization increases.

The present study was designed to examine whether the overgeneralization or transfer strategy is more dominant as a force among adult native speakers of Japanese and also to investigate whether or not Taylor's hypothesis can be confirmed with Japanese speakers.

SUBJECTS

The subjects for this study were all native Japanese speakers who were receiving formal instruction in English at the Center for English as a Second Language (CESL) at

Southern Illinois University during the spring of 1980. There are four levels at CESL. A CESL placement test is used to divide the students into the four levels. The CESL placement test consists of three parts: structure, listening comprehension, and reading. After Level 4, the students are ready to go to universities or colleges.

For the present study, fifteen students were selected at random from the three levels (2, 3, and 4), five from each level (there were no Japanese students in Level 1); these subjects had been studying for from one to six months at CESL and ranged in age from 21 to 36 years, with a mean age of 24. All subjects had received prior instruction in English for from six to nine years in Japan before they came to the United States.

METHOD AND ANALYSIS

The procedure followed for investigating syntactic overgeneralization and transfer errors was to administer to the subjects fifty Japanese sentences recorded by a native Japanese speaker. The test, preceded by five practice sentences, was given in one sitting; each sentence was heard twice. The subjects were asked to translate the sentences into grammatically correct English. They had thirty seconds to translate each sentence: this limitation of time was made in order to elicit the subject's immediate responses in order to reduce monitoring.

The sentences were rather simple, and only easy and common vocabulary was used. Thus, the translations tested not lexical but syntactic proficiency. Vocabulary which seemed difficult was given in translation on the answer sheet, so as to elicit a complete sentence for each response.

The present study is different from Taylor's in that Taylor tested the subjects' mastery of only the auxiliary and verb phrases while in this study thirteen syntactic items were also tested. The following are the syntactic items tested:

1. Article (definite/indefinite)
2. Negation
3. Copula
4. Plural
5. Possessive
6. 3rd person singular
7. Present tense
8. Present progressive tense
9. Past tense (regular/irregular)
10. Present perfect tense (including present perfect progressive)
11. Modal (could)
12. WH-clause (word order)
13. Yes/No-question

The translations of the fifty Japanese sentences by the fifteen subjects yielded 750 English sentences and 179 errors for analysis. Each sentence was evaluated only on the basis of the syntactic items under investigation. Any other errors, including misspellings, were discounted. Error analysis was applied to the data to attempt to identify overgeneralization and transfer errors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data showed hardly any characteristic differences in the errors made among each level of subjects. Subjects of Levels 2, 3, and 4 made the same kinds of errors. However, as the level of proficiency in English increased, the number of errors within each error type decreased. This too was found by Taylor (1975: 82):

. . . increased proficiency in English does not qualitatively affect the kinds of errors which a learner makes. While the intermediate subjects made fewer errors in almost every error type, their most frequent errors were usually also the errors which the elementary subjects made most frequently.

However, there was one type of error that was found in Level 2 only. The following are examples:

1. Mary asked me what *were* you do yesterday.

2. *I'm* not remember . . .

(Subject did not write anything after the word "remember." ". . . how I did it " should come after "remember.")

3. *Are* you go to bed late?

Subjects used "be" to replace "do" or "did" in all the above examples. And, of course, sentence number 1 is wrong in word order also. Hatch and Wagner-Gough (1976) say that in question forms, "be" appears earlier than "do" among language universals, since this sequence is also found in first language studies.

Errors involving articles were the most common errors of both overgeneralization and transfer for all levels. Japanese has no articles; thus, correct use of the definite article and the indefinite article is extremely difficult for Japanese students of English. Most transfer errors were article omission:

4. Children in _____ playground are very noisy.

5. They believed _____ earth was flat.

6. Mr. Saito is _____ landscape painter.

Another, although less frequent kind of transfer error involving articles was the use of "its" for "the." Japanese requires either the possessive pronoun "its" or demonstratives such as "this," "that," "these," "those," where English uses the definite article:

7. *Its* little boy tore a newspaper.

One kind of overgeneralization error involving articles

was the incorrect use of “a” for “an” or “the”:

8. My father has been watching TV for *a* hour.

9. I'm *a* tallest of the three boys.

Another kind of overgeneralization error here was the unnecessary use of articles due to hypercorrection:

10. Mary is wearing *a* Jack's hat.

11. There is *a* someone's cigarette on my desk.

Non-existence of articles in Japanese may explain the difficulty of acquiring articles. However, Hatch and Wagner-Gough (1976) say that even in first language learning, articles are developed very slowly since they are not necessary for communication.

Errors of plurals and 3rd person singular were the most common transfer errors for all levels. Plural markers do not exist in the Japanese language, although a plural marker can be used for animate nouns, and a few inanimate nouns such as tree, house and mountain. Use of plural markers for these exceptions is optional. Obviously, the omission of plural markers by the subjects was due to interference from Japanese:

12. I had to take care of Mary's two *baby*.

13. I smell *hotdog*.

14. A man has a few wives in some *country*.

In the Japanese language system, there is only one verb form for both number and person; that is, number and person do not affect verbs. The following kinds of errors made frequently by the subjects are based on the lack of subject-verb agreement in Japanese:

15. My sister *drive* a car.

16. My father *go* fishing every Saturday.

17. Tom *watch* TV every day.

Many transfer errors in the present perfect progressive tense were found at Level 2. In Japanese, both present perfect and present perfect progressive tenses exist as concepts but not as tense forms. These concepts are

expressed by adverb forms as well as by context. Thus, it is difficult for lower level Japanese learners to express such concepts with English forms. For the sentences, "Mr. Smith has been teaching at SIU for more than two years", the subjects used the incorrect forms:

18. Mr. Smith *teaches* at SIU for more than two years.

19. Mr. Smith *is teaching* at SIU for more than two years.

These sentences are a direct translation of the present progressive sentence in Japanese.

The second most common overgeneralization error, after the article errors, are WH-clause (word order) errors in Level 2:

20. Could you tell me *please where is the post office?*

21. I don't remember *how did I do it.*

The subjects apparently made a hypothesis that the order of WH-clauses is the same as that of WH-questions.

The percentages in Table 1 indicate ratios of the total number of errors made by the subjects of each level in the thirteen syntactic items with regard to the distribution between overgeneralization and transfer errors.

The proportion of article overgeneralization errors tends to increase with the level of proficiency, while the proportion of transfer errors decreases. Most of the items reveal the same overall pattern as the articles. This pattern is very similar to that found by Taylor (1975). However, the plurals and 3rd person singular reveal an opposite pattern to that of the articles. The proportion of overgeneralization errors for both plurals and 3rd person singular tends to decrease with the level of proficiency, while the proportion of transfer errors increases. Both types of plural and 3rd person singular errors decrease in number with the level of proficiency, except for a slight increase in the plural errors between Level 3 and 4. Obviously, this shows that while there is an increased understanding of some of the rules of English with progressive levels of proficiency, some of the rules may be too difficult to acquire due to the interference of

the structure of Japanese. It is these errors which fossilize.

The marker (*) in Table 1 indicates the items and levels wherein neither overgeneralization nor transfer errors were made. Possessives were all answered correctly by the subjects of all levels, although only 's forms were examined (and not possessive pronouns). Since the possessive marker *no* in Japanese appears in the same place as 's in English, Japanese learners seem to acquire this form without much difficulty. Their proficiency in the possessive causes a ceiling effect. Other ceiling effects appear with modal and Yes/No-questions in Level 3 and 4, and with negation, the copula, and present tense in Level 4.

As indicated in Table 1, more errors are attributed to transfer than to overgeneralization. In Table 1, 42% of the errors were due to overgeneralization, and 58% to transfer. It indicates that transfer is a dominant force in the Japanese learner's language development. These results differ from those reported in Taylor, which support the claim that the majority of errors are due to overgeneralization.

Figure 1 shows the relationship between the proportion of Levels 2, 3 and 4 in both overgeneralization and transfer. As the level of proficiency increases, so does the proportion of overgeneralization errors, while the proportion of transfer errors tends to decrease. The proportion of errors made by the subjects in Level 2 due to transfer from Japanese always exceeds the proportion of transfer errors made by the subjects of Levels 3 and 4, and the transfer errors made by Level 3 subjects exceeds those made by Level 4.

This pattern, however, is reversed for overgeneralization errors. Japanese learners in the earlier stages of second language acquisition rely more heavily on the structure of Japanese and use transfer strategy more often than learners in the more advanced stages. On the other hand, learners in the more advanced stages apply a rule of the target language itself and use the overgeneralization strategy more often than

learners in the earlier stages. This corresponds exactly to the overgeneralization and transfer patterns which emerged from Taylor's (1975: 84) study, which shows "reliance on overgeneralization is directly proportional to proficiency in the target language, and reliance on transfer is inversely proportional." However, there is a strong dissimilarity between some findings of the present study and Taylor's.

Table 1

Ratios for the total number of errors made by subjects at Levels 2, 3, and 4 in relation to the distribution of those errors between overgeneralization and transfer:

Level	Overgeneralization			Transfer		
	2	3	4	2	3	4
Syntactic item						
Article	.20	.32	.62	.80	.68	.38
Negation	.25	1.00	*	.75	0.00	*
Copula	0.00	0.00	*	1.00	1.00	*
Present tense	0.00	1.00	*	1.00	0.00	*
Present progressive tense	.33	*	0.00	.67	*	1.00
Present perfect tense (incl. Present perfect progressive)	.29	.67	.50	.71	.33	.50
Past tense	.83	1.00	1.00	.17	0.00	0.00
Modal	0.00	*	*	1.00	*	*
Plural	.36	.20	.17	.64	.80	.83
Possessive	*	*	*	*	*	*
3rd person singular	.36	.33	0.00	.64	.67	1.00
WH-Clause (word-order)	.89	1.00	1.00	.11	0.00	0.00
Yes/No-questions	1.00	*	*	0.00	*	*
Mean	.38	.46	.50	.62	.54	.50
		.42			.58	

* Percentage is not calculable because neither overgeneralization nor transfer errors are made.

His study with Spanish L₁ speakers indicates that subjects in both elementary and intermediate levels made a higher proportion of overgeneralization errors than transfer errors, while the Japanese L₁ speakers in my study in Levels 2 and 3 show that transfer errors are higher than overgeneralization errors; at Level 4, both types of errors have the same proportion.

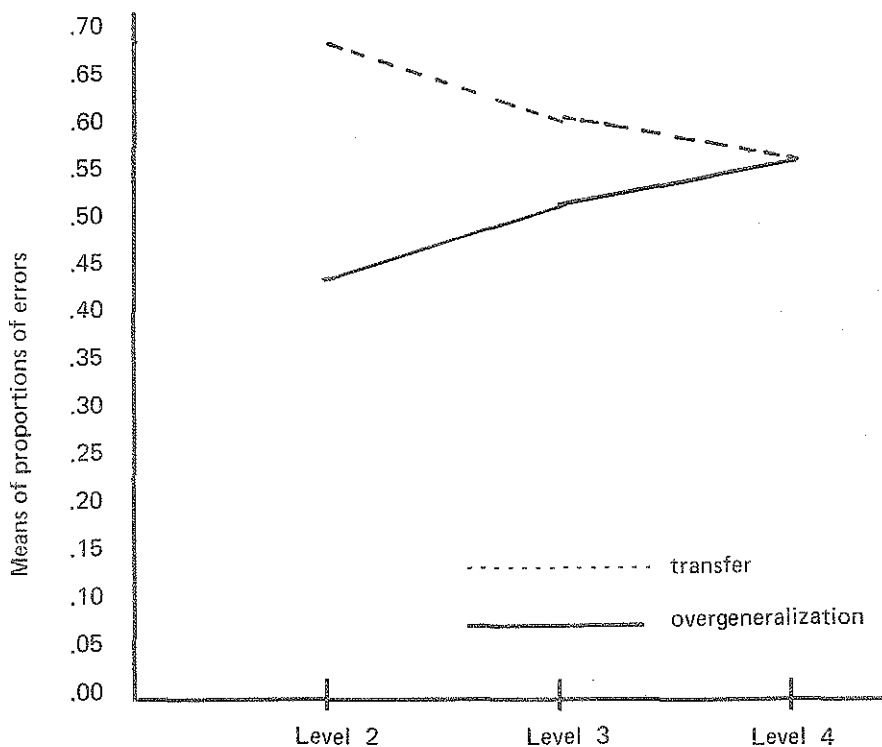


Figure 1. Means of the proportions of overgeneralization and transfer errors made by subjects at Level 2, 3, and 4.

Taylor hypothesizes that elementary subjects rely more heavily on their native language and make a greater proportion of transfer errors than intermediate subjects, while "intermediate subjects rely more heavily on an overgeneralization strategy than do elementary subjects (1975:83), and the relative proportion of transfer errors is decreased." He concludes, "that is, as a learner's proficiency increases he will rely less frequently on his native language and on the transfer strategy, and more frequently on what he already knows about the target language and on the overgeneralization strategy" (Taylor 1975:84). Thus, my findings lend only limited support to Taylor's hypothesis.

Gass (1971:342) notes that "language transfer is more likely to occur in the case where two languages are close." If this is so, why did Japanese subjects make more transfer errors than speakers of Spanish, whose surface structure is more similar to English?

Krashen (ms.:74) says that the "first language influence seems to be strongest in 'acquisition-poor environments'." Although the subjects in the present study had been in the United States from one to six months at the time the test was administered, they had received prior English instruction from six to nine years in their native country. They had been taught in "situations in which natural appropriate intake [was] scarce and where translation exercises [were] frequent" (Krashen ms.:74), and where input was only from the teacher (who used Japanese). The reason that transfer was the dominant strategy for the Japanese subjects may be due to this fact.

Another explanation for the high proportion of transfer errors may have to do with a methodological problem in translation from native language to target language. In the present study, the same elicitation procedure was used.

Taylor (1975) says that direct translation is more efficient than an oral method because it is difficult to compare the errors made by different speakers: some might make fewer errors avoiding some specific structures they are not sure of and others might be more "impulsive." However, he admits that the translation method perhaps "loads" a study in favor of transfer and interference" (1975:76). Moreover, direct translation may encourage the use of the Monitor. This methodological problem might have affected the results of the present study with Japanese speakers as well as Taylor's with Spanish speakers.

It is interesting to note that in Figure 1, with the increase in level of proficiency the proportion of transfer errors decreases, and that of overgeneralization errors increase until they intersect at point .50, Level 4. From this observation, it may be predicted that the proportion of transfer errors continues to decrease and that of overgeneralization continues to increase with progressive levels of proficiency, and that overgeneralization will be the dominant strategy for more advanced Japanese learners of English. Evidence in favor of this prediction would give greater support to Taylor's hypothesis.

However, further study might show another outcome: with the increasing levels of proficiency, overgeneralization errors decrease as students learn to use the target language more fluently and no longer need this strategy as much, while errors due to native interference decrease to a certain base level of fossilization, because of the difficulty of losing "deep" native habits, e.g., article, plural and 3rd person singular. Thus, the proportion of transfer errors might be higher than that of overgeneralization errors. The former possibility is sketched in Figure 2 and the latter in Figure 3.

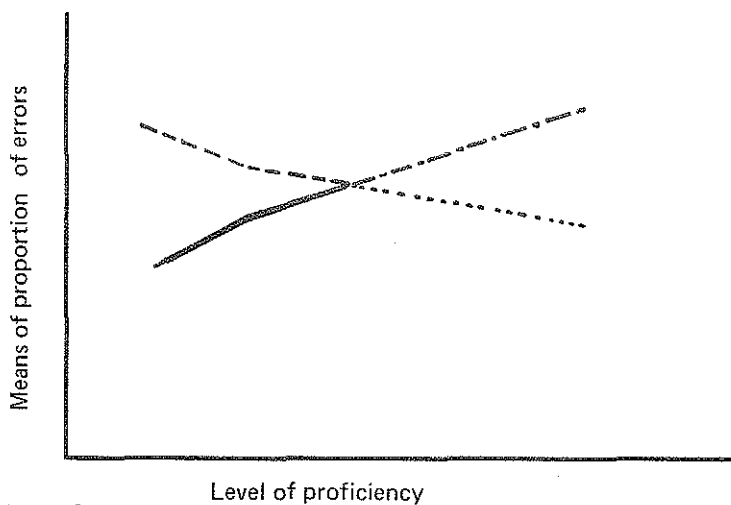


Figure 2.

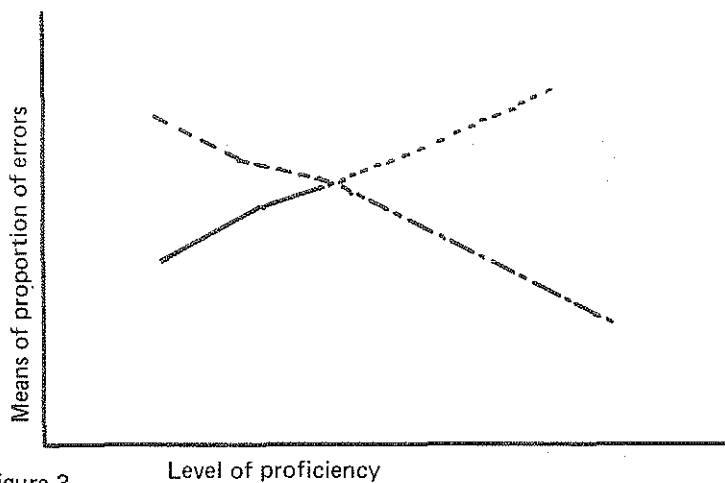


Figure 3.

- transfer
- predicted transfer direction
- overgeneralization
- · - · - predicted overgeneralization direction

CONCLUSION

The present study found that 42% of the subjects' errors were attributable to overgeneralization and 58% of the errors were attributable to transfer. Analysis of the data indicates that both overgeneralization and transfer strategies play important roles in second language acquisition.

The results of this study support Taylor's (1975) finding that overgeneralization and transfer errors are not qualitatively different for different levels of learners but are quantitatively different. This study gives limited support to his hypothesis (1975) that as a learner's degree of proficiency in the target language increases, he will rely less heavily on the transfer strategy and more heavily on the overgeneralization strategy.

However, in the present study, transfer was the dominant strategy for all levels of subjects, although the degree of reliance on it decreased as the learner's proficiency increased. The results reported by Taylor seem to "confirm the weakness of a transfer-based theory of errors" (Taylor 1975:86).

From the present study, it might be predicted that for more advanced Japanese learners of English, overgeneralization will be the dominant strategy, since it was found that with increasing levels of proficiency, the proportion of overgeneralization errors tends to increase while that of transfer errors tends to decrease.

Another possible prediction is that overgeneralization would eventually decrease for more advanced students as they learn the target language, while there might be some errors due to native interference too difficult to overcome which thus fossilize, although the number of transfer errors would still decrease. These predictions should be pursued in further research.

It is very difficult to elicit specific syntactic structures sufficiently. The direct translation used here might encourage "conscious Monitoring" (Krashen ms.:56) and an oral elicitation procedure might invite the use of an avoidance strategy. Further studies should also be done on elicitation methodology in order to control elicitation of specific syntactic structure.

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