

A Study of Beginning ESL Students' Performance in Interview Tests

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Researchers into first language acquisition, naturalistic second language acquisition and instructed second language acquisition have sought to describe their subjects' chronological development, and have employed a variety of measures of language development. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982, p. 215) list eight such measures. Larsen-Freeman (1978, p. 440) bemoans the absence of a single, universal measure applicable to the acquisition of all second languages, while Brown (1973, p. 55) suggests that a single index may be insufficient. In the absence of a single, recognized measure of second language development, four potential areas of development are examined in the present study of instructed second language acquisition. Length of turn is an index of grammatical development (Brown, 1973, p. 53), expressed in terms of the mean number of morphemes per turn over a given sample of subjects' speech, a turn being defined as what is said by any one person before or after another person speaks.

The speech of the subjects of the present study was sampled on three separate occasions spanning the first 15 months of instruction in English as a second language at junior high school. Error and pausing are measures of constraints on subjects' second language performance. Lennon (1991) defines error as a "linguistic form or combination of forms which, in the same context and under similar conditions of production, would in all likelihood, not be produced by the speakers' native speaker counterparts" (p. 182). This definition is employed in the present study. Pauses may be either silent pauses-silent breaks between words-or filled pauses-breaks filled by sounds such as "ah," "er," "uh," "mm." In this study three lengths of pause are distinguished: less than one second, from one to three seconds, and more than three seconds. Initiation considers the use to which subjects put their second language, and is defined as spontaneously going beyond the framework set up by the interviewer, either by proffering supplementary

information not strictly called for by the interviewer's question, or by adopting the role of the questioner.

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 15 Japanese students at Tokyo Bunka Gakuen Junior High School, ranging in age from 12 to 13, and were selected from 80 students taught by the researcher on the basis of perceived good performance in end-of-term oral interview tests. A questionnaire was administered to the subjects to determine the nature and extent of their exposure to English outside the compulsory education system. It was found that, apart from attendance at "cram" schools, exposure was limited. Of the 15 subjects, only four had visited an English speaking country for periods of one week and less than one third of the subjects claimed to listen to English or American radio or NHK English lessons on the radio and TV, have English speaking friends or relatives, or read English or American books, comics and magazines. One subject had previous experience of English study at primary school.

Procedure. All subjects took an oral test at the end of each term in the form of a short one-to-one interview with the researcher based on a list of questions which had been practiced in the classroom. Underhill (1987, p. 61) describes this test procedure. The tests were audio recorded, and the recordings for all 15 subjects on three occasions. June 1991, December 1991 and June 1992, spanning the subjects' first 15 months of English study, were selected for analysis. The recordings were transcribed using normal orthography, errors were identified in consultation with a native speaker colleague and marked on the transcripts, as were pauses. Subjects' mean length of turn was calculated following the guidelines proposed by Brown (1973, p. 54) for calculating mean length of utterance. The percentage of error-free turns was determined, and the nature of error examined, employing a fourfold classification of error into errors of omission, errors of over-suppliance, errors of permutation, and errors of substitution, discussed by Lennon (1991, p. 189). The percentage of pause-free turns was calculated. Subjects' performance was examined for instances of initiation.

Results

The results of the study under the headings of length of turn, error and pausing are presented in Tables 1 to 3. Initiation is then described.

Table 1
Subjects' Mean Length of Turn in Morphemes

Subject	June 1991	December 1991	June 1992
1	1.64	3.60	3.02
2	1.66	3.17	3.86
3	1.50	3.77	3.62
4	1.53	3.61	2.78
5	1.70	3.10	3.94
6	1.80	4.14	4.41
7	1.81	3.48	4.08
8	1.70	3.08	4.05
9	1.81	3.13	3.32
10	2.30	3.50	5.35
11	1.64	3.28	3.43
12	1.44	3.08	4.52
13	1.89	2.76	3.93
14	1.88	2.33	3.63
15	1.82	2.52	3.32
Overall mean	1.74	3.23	3.81

Mean length of turn conceals variation between the length of separate turns produced by subjects. In the first interview, June 1991, single morpheme turns predominate, multi-morpheme turns being restricted to a limited number of utterances occurring at the beginning of the interview. The longest turn produced in the first interview is "I'm fine, thank you, and you?" (seven morphemes), which was produced by all 15 subjects. In the second interview, December 1991, the longest turn consisted of 17 morphemes, subject 5: "My telephone number is ..." (followed by the 13 digits of the number). The longest turn recorded in the study was produced by subject 10 in the third, June 1992, interview in response to the question "How many are in your family?" and consisted of 22 morphemes: "Five. My father, my mother, my brother Yuta, my sister Sayuka, and me Megumi. Yuta is ten. Sayuka is five years old." All three examples given here of subjects' performance are of items practiced in the classroom in preparation for the interview tests.

Table 2
Percentage of Error-free Turns Produced by Subjects*

Subject	June 1991	December 1991	June 1992
1	75%	82%	75%
2	81%	85%	86%
3	84%	74%	90%
4	85%	69%	84%
5	81%	86%	89%
6	81%	76%	77%
7	86%	87%	89%
8	70%	87%	84%
9	68%	95%	81%
10	100%	95%	82%
11	89%	93%	78%
12	84%	83%	86%
13	89%	100%	90%
14	94%	91%	90%
15	82%	100%	91%
Overall mean	83%	86%	84%

*All percentages are rounded down to the nearest whole number.

Subjects committed a range of error types, which may be classified into four categories: omission, oversuppliance, permutation, and substitution. Errors of omission occur when an obligatory element is left out (e.g., Subject 9, June 1992: "I get up seven o' clock"). Errors of oversuppliance, on the contrary, result from inclusion of an element which would normally not be present (e.g., Subject 8, June 1992: "I usually go to home"). Errors of permutation are characterized by incorrect word order (e.g., Subject 1, June 1992: "What do you like animals?"). Errors of substitution are a combination of oversuppliance and omission, where one or more elements would have to be omitted, and another or others supplied, to correct the error (e.g., Subject 5, June 1992: "I'm birthday is September the nineteenth").

The following are examples of pause-free turns taken from subjects' performance in the third, June 1992, interview. Subject 2: "My telephone is" (followed by a ten digit number). Subject 4: "Five. My grandmother, my mother, my sisters Keiko and Sachiko, and me." Subject 5 "I come from Suginami-ku."

Table 3
 Percentage of Pause-free Turns Produced by Subjects*
 (Pause = unfilled pause of one second or over)

Subject	June 1991	December 1991	June 1992
1	52%	47%	53%
2	74%	77%	86%
3	78%	70%	72%
4	57%	61%	71%
5	70%	65%	63%
6	70%	85%	61%
7	68%	83%	70%
8	66%	70%	48%
9	68%	68%	75%
10	100%	85%	70%
11	89%	68%	50%
12	68%	48%	50%
13	63%	35%	32%
14	55%	50%	29%
15	52%	60%	47%
Overall mean	68%	64%	58%

*All percentages are rounded down to the nearest whole number.

Only Subject 12, in the third, June 1992, interview, initiated as it is defined for the purposes of this study, by asking the interviewer two questions in two separate turns: "I come from Edogawa-ku. Where do you come from?" "Four. My father, my mother, and brother Yoshio, and me, Chie. Yoshio is twelve. How many are in your family?" In both instances, question forms presented and practiced in the classroom were employed by the subject to initiate.

Discussion

Instructed second language development was examined under four headings in the present study, length of turn, error, pausing and initiation.

Length of turn, Table 1, is the sole indicator of second language development. All 15 subjects' mean length of turn increased between the first (June 1991) and the second (December 1991) interview, and though three subjects' mean length of turn decreased between the second (December 1991) and the third (June 1992) interview, the overall mean rose over the

three interviews. This result parallels that reported by Brown (1973, p. 55) for the early stages of first language acquisition, and Hanania and Gradman (1977, p. 83) for the early stages of naturalistic second language acquisition. The development of the 15 subjects of the present study of instructed second language acquisition is thus quantitatively, if not qualitatively, similar to that of Browns' (1973) and Hanania and Gradman's (1977) subjects.

No developmental pattern may be observed under the heading of error, Table 2. Though the percentage of error free turns increased over the three interviews for three subjects, and a further six subjects produced a higher percentage of error-free turns in the third (June 1992) interview than in the first (June 1991) interview, the overall mean shows little variation. Subjects committed an increasing range of error types over the period of study, and failed to eradicate errors from their performance. Errors in the first (June 1991) interview were restricted to errors of omission. In the second (December 1991) interview, errors of omission persisted, in addition to errors of over suppliance and substitution, and permutation occurred. Thus a increase in accuracy was not a feature of the early instructed second language development of the 15 subjects of the present study.

No developmental pattern may be observed under the heading of pausing, Table 3. Though the percentage of pause free turns increased steadily over the three interviews for two subjects, and a further three subjects produced a higher percentage of pause free turns in the third (June 1992) interview than in the first (June 1991), the overall mean decreased slightly over the period of the study. Thus an increase in fluency was not a feature of the early instructed second language development of the 15 subjects of the present study.

No developmental pattern may be observed under the heading of initiation in the present study. Initiation as it is defined for the purposes of the study occurred only in the output of one subject in the third (June 1992) interview. This result supports the view proposed by Clark (1987, p. 204) who suggests that it is likely to take one or two years for beginners of secondary age to gain sufficient input and confidence to initiate in a second language, though it is not clear on what grounds Clark bases this statement.

Though the teaching of oral English is receiving increasing attention in Japan at junior and senior high school level, little attention seems to be devoted to examining the impact of teaching programs on learners' second language development. Wiig (1985, p. 76) suggests that foreign instructor's efforts to teach oral English at senior high school level are unlikely to be effective, though it is not clear on what grounds he bases

this claim. The results of the present study suggest that Japanese beginning ESL learners benefit from instruction in oral English at junior high school level, and that their second language development may be quantitatively if not qualitatively similar to that reported elsewhere in the literature for the early stages of first language acquisition, and naturalistic second language acquisition.

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