

CROSS CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Can foreign language learning be separated from knowledge of the culture of the country where the language being learned originated? In this article written exam papers completed by first year university students were studied to find the differences between the learning styles of Australian and Chinese students, and further, if experience of the culture of the country where the language being learned originated from really affected learning of the language?

INTRODUCTION

Does knowledge, or lack of knowledge of the culture, affect learning of a foreign language? Second language learners within a second language culture are influenced by the experience and alter their values, behaviour and communicative style. In recent years two important education-related developments have taken place in Australia. One is due to the prominence given in Australia to its ties with Japan in practically every sphere of the national life, the number of students studying Japanese at all levels has been rising rapidly (13). Second, development pertains to the increase in the number of foreign students, predominantly from South East Asia, seeking a degree from an Australian University with many of these students choosing to study Japanese as a part of their degree program. Each year the intake into the beginner-level Japanese courses is swelled by an increasing number of the so called International students, the majority of whom, irrespective of their country of origin, the majority are of Chinese ethnic background with the percentage at Swinburne University of Technology fluctuating over the years between 45 and 55 percent with similar trends at five other Melbourne based universities (20). In September 2002 the number of overseas students in Australia was 150,523 (8; 9), while at Swinburne University, overseas students in the Bachelor of Business comprise 33% of the cohort. In the study of Japanese language at Swinburne, the percentage of international students was around 50%.

In the process of learning a foreign language students will unavoidably produce non- native linguistic features in the target language which often cause unavoidable difficulties in communication. Strevens called these non-native features *errors, mistakes, deviations, distortions* or *points of difficulty* (21) while Kramsch (11) viewed them as *failures of performance*. With the advent of the communicative approach to language teaching, recognition was given to the fact that errors are an inevitable phenomenon in language learning (11). When structuralism theories were in vogue (18) errors were viewed as the formation of a bad habit to be avoided at all costs. With the advent of the communicative approach to language teaching on the other hand, recognition was given to the fact that errors are an inevitable phenomenon in language learning (11). Sources of errors, explanations of errors and the strategies a student employs in learning a language have been extensively examined by applied linguists of many nations and the resultant findings, elucidated in the relevant literature, reflect the main objectives of individual researchers and the different theories each of them embraced. 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 (12). In addition to the language difficulties, 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 (3). Learning styles attributed to different cultures have also been examined by a range of authors across a number of disciplines Many authors have commented on the differences in learning styles between Australian and international students, and more specifically, learning styles of Chinese students (2; 4; 6; 7; 1417; 19; 22; 23).

THE STUDY

The final second semester test serves as the basis for the identification and comparison of syntactic errors made by the Australian and the Chinese students. Composition was based on pictorial aids. Students were asked to write a cohesive narrative based on pictorial clues provided in the test paper to answer the question *shuumatsu wa nani o shimashitaka* (what did you do on the weekend?) The sequencing of the pictorial aids (specific time on a clock, car, restaurant, salad, steak and beer) was designed to elicit a text incorporating a variety of particles and the gerundive form of verbs and/or adjectives. The instruction stipulated at least five compound sentences with the proviso that the continuation of the narrative had to be maintained. Although the students did not know what pictorial aids would be used and what they would be required to write, the free composition aspect of the exercise provided some scope for avoidance of poorly internalised structures and/or vocabulary, a common strategy in language students (5). Selection of the syntactic features to be investigated in this research was based on lengthy experience in teaching Japanese that allowed to the identification of *particles* as the syntactic items, which perennially cause acquisition problems for beginner students. Furthermore, the decision to concentrate on *particles* was reinforced by the fact that a fairly sizeable body of research has been carried out in recent years in this area, mainly by Japanese scholars as exemplified by Ishita and Akudagawa (1; 10). Most of these investigations deal with errors in the usage of particles by fairly homogenous groups of students, undertaking Japanese language courses in Japan. Consequently comparison of errors in the same syntactic area made by two ethnically disparate groups of learners, acquiring the language outside Japan, can bring forth some interesting findings with significant implications for language teaching methodologies. Consequently, the syntactic features on which this investigation is centred are *particles*, that is *postpositional morphemes* which in Japanese define the function of nouns in a sentence.

METHODOLOGY

Thirty students, fifteen Australian (A) and fifteen Chinese (C) were ultimately selected as the sample. The main criterion for the selection was similarity of personal attributes, both across the sample and within the two groups as seen in Tables 1 and 2. These attributes included age, gender and performance with previous exposure to Japanese being the research variable. The written texts and the grammar components were examined for each individual student and errors in the usage of selected particles were identified and checked for correctness of interpretation by a native-speaker of Japanese. The frequency of errors per text per student and subsequently per A and C group 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*, *intra-lingual*, *developmental* and *induced* types and the frequency of occurrence of each type was compared for the A and C groups (12). 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.

RESULTS

The errors are examined within two categories: usage of a wrong particle (WP) and omission of the particle (OP). Errors occurred in a number of forms, such as wrong particle, omission of particle, overusage of particle, subject marker errors, direct object marker errors and indirect object marker errors. While all errors cannot be discussed in this format of the paper, Wrong particle errors will be presented as an example, with a summary of all errors being provided. The distribution of errors in the wrong particle (WP) category was 19.2% for the A group and 14.3% for the C group. Only a small number of *developmental* type errors occurred in the pictorial-aid section. The free composition aspect of the exercise provided an opportunity for students to avoid most of the imperfectly internalised

structures. It has to be pointed out also that the type of composition demanded of the students in this part of the test was not conducive to usage of numerous grammatical subjects. The question *shuumatsu wa nani o shimashitaka* (what did you do at the weekend?) identified each student as the subject/topic **you** of the question and **I** of the answer, thus, in accordance with the rules of the Japanese language, deletion of the subject from the surface structure of the discourse was allowed. In fact, unless a new grammatical subject was introduced at some stage, it was possible to write the whole composition without using the *GA/WA* markers.

Table 1
Quantative Comparison of Errors in the A and C data

	WP	OP	Total Errors	Total Errors per Total Occurrences
Australian	36 22.1%	21 12.9%	57 100%	163 -100% TE – 35%
Chinese	30 19.2%	16 10.3%	46 100%	156 – 100% TE – 29.5%

WP: Wrong Particle OP: Omission Particle TE: Total Errors

As indicated by the tabulated information, there is a great deal of similarity in the type of errors made by the two groups of students. The percentage figures for the WP and OP errors as shown, in Table 1 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.

CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study was to utilise the distribution of particle errors in the Australian and the Chinese data for the purpose of evaluating the validity of the often expressed concerns that the International Chinese students learning Japanese in an Australian classroom are having difficulty in comparison with their Australian peers. English language being used as the medium of grammar instruction, teaching materials designed for English-speaker learners, dialogues and similar exercises set in various Australian contexts unfamiliar to the Chinese students etc. have been cited as some of the disadvantaging factors in addition to perceived differences in their perceived educational backgrounds and styles of learning. However, the findings of this study suggest that the Chinese students appear to have had significantly less difficulty than the Australian group in mastering at least the particle aspect of the Japanese syntax as illustrated in the tables and figures above. First when examined for errors in the usage of the grammatical subject / topic marker, and the direct object marker, errors in the usage of these three markers were clustered at specific points of difficulty common to most students in both groups. The errors found in the data appear to be of the developmental type, in regard to the quantitative comparison between the two groups of students. Second when examined for errors in the usage of indirect object markers, acquisition of rules governing the different functions of indirect particle, appears to be somewhat more problematic. Most of the errors in the usage of all particles occurred in conjunction with structures of particular difficulty to most students.

The tabulated figures 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. and should be analysed further in order to improve teaching to meet the needs of all students, both Australian and Chinese studying Japanese language, particularly in the light of increasing numbers of overseas students of Chinese background studying in Australian universities.

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