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RAISING AWARENESS OF LANGUAGE TRANSFER WITH ACADEMIC ENGLISH WRITING STUDENTS AT A JAPANESE UNIVERSITY

日本の大学におけるアカデミック英文ライティング学生の言語転移の認識向上

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Abstract

This article briefly describes the phenomenon of language transfer, or first language interference, for Japanese learners of English and suggests one method of raising intermediate level English students' awareness of this phenomenon in a Japanese undergraduate Academic English class. Class activities and homework tasks are described, student feedback is presented and conclusions are drawn. It is hoped that this article might prove useful to teachers of EAP at the tertiary level of education, in particular Japan, and more generally in the sector elsewhere.

Keywords: Language transfer, first language interference, cross linguistic interference, TESL, ESL, TESOL, EAP, Academic English, teaching materials development, phonology, grammar, vocabulary.

1. Introduction

Language transfer, or first language interference from a learner's first language (L1) in the learning of a second language (L2) is a well documented phenomenon in the Applied Linguistics literature. It refers to learners of a second language applying knowledge of their first (or other) language in the language learning process. Contrastive analysis theory (Lennon 2008) suggests that the more differences that exist between a learner's L1 and L2, the more likely it is that language transfer can negatively affect their language acquisition.

A common challenge faced by teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) is at least to some extent raising their students' awareness of the role of L1 language transfer on their L2 acquisition. If students can become more aware of the kinds of language transfer issues caused by their L1, it stands to reason that this would greatly assist them in their L2 acquisition, and therefore contribute to improvements in their overall L2 abilities.

This article aims to describe one suggestion to fulfill this aim with second year undergraduate

students of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at Osaka University's School of Foreign Studies.

2. Course Context

The stated aim of the course is to provide opportunities for students to engage with a wide variety of materials in a multi-skilled approach with the aim of guiding them to a demonstrably higher level of competence in using the English language in the academic environment. It is hoped that the course will equip students with the skills required to be able to potentially participate in study courses in universities in English speaking countries.

The cohort of students in this context is composed almost exclusively of Japanese nationals with Japanese being their L1, and the class is therefore ostensibly monolingual. Classes consist of roughly 20 year 2 students, whose English ability ranges from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate. The set of activities described here are offered in the first semester of a two semester, 30 x 90 minute class Academic English course which meets once a week and aims to help improve students' writing, speaking, listening, reading, and presentation and discussion skills.

3. Inspirations

The inspiration for the activities detailed in this article came from two sources.

Firstly, Guse (2011) suggests numerous methods of introducing Communicative Methods of teaching EAP at the tertiary level. One such method is to require different students in one class to prepare a variety of presentations on a similar theme, with the aim that students can adopt both teacher and student roles regarding that particular theme or issue. She suggests a number of different themes, such as health, the environment and education, and suggests sub-topics for different students to pursue. In the case of health, for instance, these sub-topics might be smoking, alcohol abuse, obesity, salt consumption reduction among others. In other classes on this course, this approach has been very successful in improving students' vocabulary on a thematic basis.

The second inspiration was Smith and Swan (2014), who describe the effects of language transfer on ESL students from a large number of L1 backgrounds. This book serves as an invaluable resource for teachers of ESL in most parts of the world to raise awareness of typical errors that might be made by their students as a result of this L1 background. The chapter used in this case is the one which highlights how language transfer can affect Japanese L1 learners of English as an L2. The chapter provides a brief background to the Japanese language and the language learning context, and then examines typical examples of language transfer in Japanese English learners. These are, specifically, phonological aspects, namely vowels and consonants, syllable structure, word linking and intonation. Grammatical features include word order, topicalisation, verbs, tenses, conditionals, the passive

voice, number and articles and conjunctions. Vocabulary and style are also considered.

4. Typical examples of how language transfer can affect Japanese students' English

4.1 Phonology

Smith and Swan (ibid.) point out that Japanese displays “a rather limited phonetic inventory, ... (simple) syllable structure” making English’s more complex sound combinations difficult to reproduce for L1 Japanese students of English. In terms of vowels, they suggest, typical problem areas are distinguishing between /ɔ:/ and /əʊ/ in *caught* and *coat*, /æ/ and /ʌ/ in *lack* and *luck*, and /ə/ being pronounced as /ɑ:/ as in /kəm'po:zə:/ in *composer*. The limited inventory can also be seen in examples of L1 interference in terms of consonants. This explains the often cited examples of difficulty in distinguishing between /l/ and /r/ as in *rice* and *lice*, and /v/ and /b/ as in *berry* and *very*. Examples of other phonological problem areas for Japanese L1 learners are consonant clusters, unstressed forms and borrowed English words in the Japanese language, such as *grapefruit juice* グレープフルーツジュース.

4.2 Grammar

Striking differences between Japanese and English grammar often cause problems for Japanese L2 learners. Smith and Swan (ibid.) suggest these problem areas would typically be word order, topicalisation, verbs, complementation, tenses, conditionals, number and articles, amongst others.

4.3 Vocabulary

Suggested typical problems for Japanese L1 learners of English are the often non-equivalence of fixed phrases in Japanese, such as いただきます (itadakimasu, a phrase often said before eating) or お疲れ様 (otsukaresama, a phrase used as a goodbye greeting at the end of the working day), invented English-sounding words such as ベッドタウン (beddu-taun, or dormitory town), telescoped words such as パソコン (pasokon, denoting personal computer), or loan words taken from languages other than English, such as for カルテ (karute, taken from the German word ‘Karte’ for medical record). As any experienced English language teacher in Japan can attest, these examples of non-equivalence in terms of vocabulary can often lead to comprehensibility issues.

5. Lesson activities

The set of activities described below take place over a three week period, and are divided into a discussion and the setting of a presentation preparation homework in the first week, a presentation

and discussion session in the second week, and a written assignment homework to be prepared for a peer feedback session in the third week. All the activities are chronologically detailed below.

5.1 Introductory discussion

Students are invited to activate their existing knowledge by discussing a number of questions related to language transfer in general and their own personal experiences in particular. Sharing experiences with each other can help activate their existing schema and boost their confidence to utilize relevant and appropriate vocabulary.

Examples of these initial discussion questions are provided below, and can be discussed in pairs or small groups.

1. What are some of the differences and similarities between Japanese and English *pronunciation*?
2. What are some of the differences and similarities between Japanese and English *vocabulary*?
3. What are some of the differences and similarities between Japanese and English *grammar*?
4. What problems did you face when you first started learning English?
5. What problems have you faced since you started at this university?

Students are then provided with the full text of the chapter in Learner English related to Japanese L1 learners of English. They are assigned a small section of the text, and they are asked to make a presentation on that section in the following week's lesson. The text is divided into five sections as it was felt that this was a reasonable amount of material to wrestle with in the relatively short preparation time available to students (1 week). Students are also expected to research beyond the assigned texts in order to provide more information to their audience and also to encourage improvements in students' research and critical thinking skills.

5.2 Presentation session

This second session is roughly divided into three parts; share and prepare, presentation and finally discussion. The details are discussed briefly below.

5.2.1 Stage One

Students are initially given a chance to exchange information with other students who have researched and prepared the same area of the Learner English text. They are asked to practice their presentations, and augment their own presentations, where appropriate, with information from their

colleagues' contributions. They are also required to create discussion questions, based on their presentations, the Learner English text or on the subjects of language transfer and L2 acquisition more generally. This preparation period generally takes 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

5.2.2 Stage Two

Students are regrouped so that there are 4 or 5 students in each new group. Each student in the new group has prepared a presentation on just one particular aspect of the Learner English text. By the end of the presentation section, therefore, all material in the assigned text will be covered. Students are informed that their subsequent writing task will be to summarize the presentations, and so are advised to take notes on their new colleagues' presentations, and are also encouraged to ask questions about any areas that require further clarification. Depending on the size of the group, this presentation phase can require up to 45 minutes.

5.2.3 Part Three

Students are invited to initiate discussions based on the presentations in Part Two, using the discussion questions that they prepared in their initial groupings in Part One. Each group is asked to choose a secretary, who will take brief notes about the discussions. Finally each group secretary summarizes the discussion, including the most interesting and salient points in a teacher-led class plenary session. Other groups can contribute and react where necessary and appropriate. This discussion and plenary phase generally takes 15-20 minutes, and is the final activity of the class before the writing assignment is distributed and explained. In addition to the discussion questions that students prepared in Part One, the following questions are also provided.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ABOUT LEARNER ENGLISH

1. What surprised you?
2. What did you know already?
3. What did you learn about English?
4. What is so wrong about a Japanese accent in English?
5. You don't need to learn pronunciation if you live in Japan. What do you think?
6. How do you think language transfer works in reverse for people learning Japanese as an L2?
7. Which of these errors do you make / not make?
8. How can you use this information to improve your English?

5.3 Presentation guidelines

Students are given guidelines on how they should approach the presentation task. In these guidelines, they are asked to prepare a 5 minute presentation on their assigned section of the LE text. They are instructed to follow accepted norms of presentations, for example using note cards instead of full scripts, using presentation software such as Keynote, Power Point or Prezi, and allowing opportunities for audiences to ask questions for clarification. Students are also instructed to ask various questions of their audience; namely, content-based questions about the presentation to check for comprehension, and wider discussion questions to foster debate related to the issues raised in the presentation.

5.4 Writing assignment

The writing assignment is set at the end of the second lesson. Students are expected to write a short essay (300 words) in Academic English style describing the effect of language transfer for Japanese learners of English as an L2 based on the presentations they have either presented and completed or listened to in the second session as well as their own, self-directed research.

6. Skills covered in these activities

The activities described in this article require students to use a variety of skills in their successful completion. These include discussion skills in the initial schema activation stage, reading and research skills in the homework preparation stage, presentation, listening and note-taking skills in the main lesson, and Academic Writing skills in the completion of the final writing assignment. It is hoped that this integrated multi-skill approach is of benefit to students who want to improve their all-round English skills.

7. Student feedback

After the activities described here, students were asked for their reactions and impressions in an anonymous questionnaire. In particular, in order to measure efficacy of the activities, it seemed appropriate to survey their ideas in a number of areas. These areas include investigating their reporting of their previous knowledge of language transfer, which areas of language transfer they were able to improve their knowledge on, what kind of difficulties were encountered through using the text through extra, private research, students impressions on how the knowledge of language transfer can help L2 learners, and finally how much they felt their English would improve through participation in these activities.

QUESTIONNAIRE ABOUT LANGUAGE TRANSFER

1. Before the presentation and assignment, how much did you know about Language Transfer?
2. What did you learn about how your first language affects your second language?
3. How difficult was the research for the presentation and essay?
4. What difficulties did you experience with the Learner English text?
5. In what ways can a knowledge of language transfer help second language learners?
6. How much will your English speaking and writing improve because of the research, presentation and assignment connected with Learner English?

Examples of typical student responses are thematically provided below.

7.1 Previous knowledge

There was a mixed response to this question from students. While some students seemed reasonably familiar with some aspects of the problems faced by Japanese learners of English;

“I did know about famous problems like pronunciation of ‘r’ and ‘l’ but I didn’t know about the phonology”

most expressed little to no knowledge of the concept, but showed interest;

“I didn’t know much about it, but I was interested in it”

“I hardly knew about language transfer. I had never heard of it in other classes, but the difference of the combination of a consonant and vowel was very interesting”

These typical responses regarding students’ previous knowledge suggest that there was indeed significant value in incorporating these activities into the course in order to raise their awareness of language transfer in the second language acquisition process.

7.2 Learning outcomes

Students were able to display increased understanding of language transfer in their responses. Typical of these were;

“How to pronounce the two languages is greatly different”

“Japanese often say something ambiguously, but English says straightly”

“We tend to make mistakes because we use our second language the same way as our first language”

These typical responses show students’ increased awareness of the relationships, similarities and differences between Japanese and English.

7.3 Perceptions of the difficulty of the research and the text

Students provided a variety of responses to this prompt, revealing differences in perceptions of difficulties in engaging with the target text and subsequent research.

“Sometimes there are words about phonology or grammar which you may find it difficult even when those were written in Japanese”

“I didn’t have difficulties with the text, because I was familiar with linguistic terms”

“This text is easy to read and useful for understanding language transfer well”

“It was a little difficult, but I’m interested in the topic, so I enjoyed it”

This variety of responses perhaps reflects differing L2 abilities of the students, which, as noted earlier, ranges from pre- to upper-intermediate. It was encouraging to note that students displayed good levels of interest despite the perceived difficulty of the text. This is perhaps to be expected, given that all students are English majors.

7.4 Perceptions of how a knowledge of language transfer can help language learners

In their responses, students demonstrated encouraging levels of awareness of the metalinguistic nature of the material and were able to apply this knowledge to their own specific situation;

“If you know the differences between your first and second language or the language transfer, you tend to take care of their errors, so you decrease errors”

“I believe it can help learners in focusing on which points they have to be careful of when they are learning English”

Feedback was generally extremely positive to this question, with most suggesting that they had benefitted from the activities.

7.5 Expectations of students’ own improvement in English

Finally, students were asked to reflect on how they felt their English had improved through participation in the activities described above. Typical responses are presented below, and discuss improvements in academic presentations, knowledge of language transfer, self-correction and vocabulary;

“Through the practice of presentations, I feel like I am confident little more than before I probably became able to write more academically”

“I have no idea if my English improved by the research and presentation, but I’m sure I have gained knowledge of language transfer”

“Personally, it can help to find my tendency of mistakes in English. It’s really useful because I can assume what my mistakes will be like in advance”

“I learned a lot of new words related to language”

This variety of perceived improvements in students’ L2 again suggest that the activities were beneficial to their L2 learning.

8. Conclusion

Through the activities described here, students used a wide variety of language skills to engage with a relatively complex, academic style text in order to facilitate greater understanding of the phenomenon of language transfer in L2 acquisition. They were able to discuss their experiences of language acquisition, read and summarize a text, make a detailed presentation on an aspect of language transfer, listen to other student presentations and were finally able to produce good quality academic writing revealing their understanding of the phenomenon, applying it to their own specific situation.

The feedback gleaned from the anonymous questionnaire was overwhelmingly positive, and indicated that the activities were demonstrably beneficial to students in their learning. This feedback was seen as encouraging for future iterations of the activities described here.

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