

University English Learners' Speaking Competence in their Monologic Production

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Abstract

Learners' oral production has been one of the issues to be taken into serious consideration recently. The publication of The NICT JLE Corpus (The National Institute of Information and Communication Technology Japanese Learner English Corpus) has provided us with a large amount of data. However, Japanese university English learners' monologic oral production has seldom been investigated. This study examines monologic speaking produced by Japanese university English learners in their end of term speaking test. The results show us the quality of subjects' language in terms of fluency, complexity and accuracy, and that adverb phrases, missing verbs and the function of formulas are the factors which influence L2 speaking competence. We hope this can help us enhance our understanding of the process of L2 oral production, and furthermore, to develop more effective approaches to both learning and teaching.

Key terms: Monologic production, Formulas, Fluency, Complexity, Accuracy,

Introduction

Many aspects of language learners' oral production have been investigated. One of the aspects is how planning impacts oral production. Yuan and Ellis (2003) examine how differently pre-task planning and on-line planning influence the fluency, complexity, and accuracy of learners' oral production in a narrative task. They find out that "pre-task planning advantaged grammatical complexity while on-line planning resulted in both greater grammatical complexity and accuracy" (p.22). Another aspect which has been focused on by many studies is the function of formulas. It is evident from Ellis's (1984) study that formulaic speech did help early stage learners to survive in classroom interaction. Myles, Hooper, & Mitchell (1998) demonstrate that the use of formulas did indeed facilitate entry into communication and speed up production in the early stages. On the other hand, Yanai (2007) indicates that semantic category plays an important role in fluency and complexity, and gives detailed suggestions on how semantic pattern practice is carried out in classroom.

The purpose of this study is to investigate college English learners' speaking competence in their monologic production. Fluency, complexity and accuracy of subjects' oral production have been assessed. The influence of planning on language production and the function of formulas in learners' speaking are also issues to be considered in the study. Above all, the aim is to discover some effective learning strategies and teaching approaches to improve learners' speaking competence.

Method

Subjects

The subjects in this study were 17 Japanese undergraduate students who were studying in a Japanese university. They were between the ages of 18 and 20 years old, 10 males and 7 females. Before they came to the university, they had been learning English as a foreign language for six years in high school. At the time when the data of

the present study was collected, they were taking the fundamental English course of the university, and their TOEFL/ITP scores were between 400 and 450.

Data Collection

The data was collected during the end of term speaking test. Before taking the speaking test, the subjects were required to interview an international student in English on campus. They needed to ask questions about the general information of the international student and take notes. During the speaking test, one of the tasks they were asked to do was to report back on the general information about the international students they interviewed without looking at any notes. The duration of the speaking test was around eight minutes and it was recorded using an IC recorder. However, this study only examines the part of reporting back on the general information about international students. All the subjects were tested by the same teacher.

Data Analysis

The fluency, complexity, and accuracy of the subjects' production have been measured to evaluate the quality of their oral production. The measures used in this study followed those in other studies, for example, Yuan and Ellis (2003).

Fluency measures:

Fluency was measured in terms of number of words per minute.

1. Rate A: the total number of unpruned tokens produced by the subjects per minute. The words which were repeated, repaired, and replaced in the subjects' oral production were all included in Rate A.
2. Rate B: the total number of pruned tokens produced by the subjects per minute. The words which were repeated, repaired, and replaced in the subjects' oral production were excluded in Rate B.

Complexity measures:

1. Syntactic complexity: the means of the words in each T-unit produced by each subject were calculated to evaluate their syntactic complexity.
2. Lexical complexity: this study uses Mean Segmental Type-Token Ratio (MSTTR) to measure the subjects' lexical complexity. This is to follow the suggestion from Richards and Malvern (2002) to avoid the effect of text length on the type-token ratio. The subjects' productions were divided into segments of 40 words and the type-token ratio of each segment was calculated by dividing the total number of different words by the total number of words in the segment (Yuan and Ellis, 2003, p.13).

Accuracy measures:

1. Error-free clauses: the percentage of clauses which did not contain any error in terms of syntax, morphology and lexical choice (Yuan and Ellis, 2003).
2. Correct verb forms: the percentage of verbs which are used correctly in tense, aspect, modality, and subject-verb agreement (Yuan and Ellis, 2003).

Results

Fluency

As indicated above, this study uses Rate A and Rate B to measure the fluency of the language produced in the subjects' speaking. Table 1 shows each subject's achievements in the aspects of Unpruned Token, Pruned Token, Type, Rate A and Rate B as well as the means for them. They reveal that the maximums of Rate A and Rate B are 149 and 103 words per minute respectively. They were all produced by the same subject, Subject 2. The minimums of Rate A and Rate B are 35 and 29 words per minute respectively. They were produced by Subject 15. Yuan and Ellis (2003) discovered in their pre-tasking planning and on-line planning study that the means for Rate A of the no planning group, the pre-task planning group and on-line planning group were 67.16, 76.23

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and 61.73 respectively; the means for Rate B of the three groups are 60.04, 71.08 and 55.34 respectively (p.15). Since these two studies used similar measures to calculate Rate A and Rate B, we may suppose that the means for Rate A in this study is between no planning group and on-line planning group in Yuan and Ellis's study. However, the means for Rate B in this study is lower than all the groups in Yuan and Ellis's study, though it is close to on-line planning group.

Table 1: Unpruned Tokens, Pruned Tokens, Types, Rate A and Rate B Produced by the Subjects

| | Unpruned Tokens | Prune Tokens | RateA | RateB |
|--------------|--------------------|-----------------|--------|--------|
| S1 | 88 | 85 | 84.76 | 80.95 |
| S2 | 107 | 74 | 149.30 | 103.30 |
| S3 | 39 | 37 | 55.71 | 52.86 |
| S4 | 81 | 69 | 54.61 | 46.52 |
| S5 | 127 | 112 | 80.21 | 70.74 |
| S6 | 57 | 49 | 64.53 | 55.47 |
| S7 | 100 | 71 | 160.00 | 42.60 |
| S8 | 80 | 72 | 46.60 | 41.94 |
| S9 | 104 | 76 | 67.10 | 49.03 |
| S10 | 93 | 75 | 49.82 | 40.18 |
| S11 | 51 | 43 | 76.50 | 64.50 |
| S12 | 55 | 51 | 60.00 | 55.64 |
| S13 | 71 | 49 | 60.86 | 42.00 |
| S14 | 84 | 80 | 45.00 | 42.86 |
| S15 | 66 | 56 | 35.04 | 29.73 |
| S16 | 44 | 43 | 62.86 | 61.43 |
| S17 | 49 | 45 | 36.30 | 33.33 |
| <i>Means</i> | 76.24 | 63.94 | 64.01 | 53.71 |
| <i>SD</i> | 25.17 | 19.62 | 25.94 | 18.43 |

Complexity

In this study, the length of the T-unit was used to evaluate the syntactic complexity, and MSTTR was used to measure the lexical complexity of subjects' oral production. The results are shown in Table 2. The means for T-unit length and MSTTR are 6.18 and 0.70 respectively. The NICT JLE Corpus (The National Institute of Information and Communication Technology Japanese Learner English Corpus) has divided the proficiency of Japanese English learners into nine levels. According to Tono (2004), the MLU (Mean Length of Utterance) of Level 3 and Level 4 are 5.9 and 7.44 respectively. Therefore, we can consider the speaking competence of the subjects is between Level 3 and Level 4 which is novice level.

Accuracy

Two methods were used to measure the accuracy of the language produced by the subjects. They are error-free clauses and error-free verb forms. Table 2 also shows the results of the percentages of error-free clauses and error-free verb forms. Subject 4 produced the greatest number of error-free clauses, the percentage being 0.90. Subject 13 produced the greatest number of error-free verb forms, and the percentage is 1, which means he did not make any mistakes in the verb form. Subject 7 produced the lowest number of both error-free clauses and error-free verb forms.

Table 2: T-unit Length, MSTTR, Percentage of Correct Clauses and Percentage of Correct Verb Forms Produced by the Subjects

| | <u>Complexity</u> | | <u>Accuracy</u> | |
|-------|--------------------------|-------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| | T-unit Length (Words) | MSTTR | Correct Clause Percentage | Correct Verb Percentage |
| S1 | 5.50 | 0.74 | 0.50 | 0.79 |
| S2 | 8.57 | 0.72 | 0.43 | 0.78 |
| S3 | 4.14 | 0.74 | 0.86 | 1.00 |
| S4 | 5.40 | 0.75 | 0.90 | 0.90 |
| S5 | 8.08 | 0.62 | 0.46 | 0.93 |
| S6 | 6.33 | 0.78 | 0.83 | 0.86 |
| S7 | 8.43 | 0.63 | 0.14 | 0.33 |
| S8 | 6.55 | 0.78 | 0.45 | 0.62 |
| S9 | 7.00 | 0.69 | 0.63 | 0.58 |
| S10 | 5.00 | 0.63 | 0.60 | 0.90 |
| S11 | 4.40 | 0.57 | 0.40 | 0.80 |
| S12 | 4.67 | 0.78 | 0.67 | 0.67 |
| S13 | 6.80 | 0.70 | 0.60 | 1.00 |
| S14 | 7.30 | 0.69 | 0.60 | 0.71 |
| S15 | 5.65 | 0.63 | 0.44 | 0.40 |
| S16 | 5.00 | 0.73 | 0.75 | 0.89 |
| S17 | 6.20 | 0.75 | 0.40 | 0.67 |
| Means | 6.18 | 0.70 | 0.57 | 0.75 |
| SD | 1.38 | 0.06 | 0.20 | 0.19 |

Discussion

This study is to measure the fluency, complexity and accuracy of the language produced by university English learners in their monologic oral production. We will first find out the factors which influence the subjects' language in the aspects of fluency, complexity and accuracy. Afterwards, suggestions of classroom approaches to enhance learners' speaking competence will be given.

1. Factors which influence the subjects' speaking competence

Fluency and Complexity

The task of the speaking test being investigated in this study is to report back on the general information about the international students the subjects interviewed. Under these test conditions the subjects were able to prepare for the task. Although the time they had for conducting their interviews and preparing for the speaking test was two weeks, we could still consider the planning here as pre-task planning. Yuan and Ellis (2003) report that pre-task planning has a positive influence on fluency and complexity. We do not have other kinds of planning groups to compare with in this study, so it is difficult to say how exactly planning affects the quality of subjects' oral production. Certainly, this will be one of the issues for further studies.

The syntactic complexity of the subjects is just at novice level as we mentioned above. However, MSTTR is 0.70, which means 28 different words are used in every 40 words. These indicate that it is difficult for the subjects to produce long utterances, but they could convey the information at word level. On the other hand, these can also be explained as: 1) they were able to talk with a certain amount of different words because they had prepared for the test; 2) they were not able to produce long utterances because they had not prepared well; 3) they were not able to produce long utterances because they lacked knowledge of the target language, and besides they might not be able to organize their speech well.

Table 3: The Frequency of Occurrence of Adverbs and Conjunctions

| | Adverbs | Conjunctions | | |
|-----|---------|----------------|-----------|------------|
| | | <i>because</i> | <i>so</i> | <i>but</i> |
| S1 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| S2 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| S3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| S4 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| S5 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| S6 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| S7 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| S8 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| S9 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| S10 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| S11 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| S12 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| S13 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| S14 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| S15 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| S16 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| S17 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 |

Yanai (2007) indicates the importance of adverb phrases in speaking competence. Although word category has not been analyzed in this study, special attention has been given to adverbs and some frequently used conjunctions. Table 3 shows the frequency of occurrence of adverbs and conjunctions. Four of the subjects never used any adverbs. Among the other 13 subjects who produced some adverbs, 10 of them used the same adverb “very”. From this observation, we can identify 1) subjects have very limited vocabulary of adverbs; 2) it is difficult for learners to use adverb or adverb phrases in their speaking. On the other hand, only three conjunctions *because*, *but*, and *so* were found in the data. Two of the subjects used all three in their language, but seven of the subjects did not use any conjunctions at all. It is certain that this is a negative indicator of the quality of fluency and complexity.

Accuracy

Verb Forms

The percentage of grammatically correct clauses is quite low in the data, and the percentage of correct verb forms is also not high. Since the subjects were talking about the general information of the international students, the third person singular subjects should have been used frequently. However, in the usage of the third person singular subjects, 11 subjects made mistakes; only one subject did not make any mistakes. Some of the subjects produced both the correct and wrong forms in their language. This demonstrates that they have the correct knowledge of the third person singular subjects, but they were not always capable of producing it accurately, especially in oral production.

The Function of Formulas

Another error we found in the subjects’ production was missing verbs. Some of the subjects tended to speak without verbs in their language. For example, “*His hobby ... listening to music and watching TV*”; “*his family member en... four members, him, father, mother, younger sister*”. We recognize that it seems hard for the subjects to construct complete sentences, but they could still convey what they wanted to express.

Li (2007) points out that “using phrases seems a more efficient method than making complete sentences” for some learners. One of the subjects in her study tended to use phrases rather than sentences, but she communicated a lot of information with fewer words (p.60). Li’s study is about the interaction between the teacher and students, not a monologic one. In her study it is evident that the subject took advantage of using phrases to express more meanings. We can also find the same tendency in this study, that instead of using complete sentences, learners tend to use formulas to express their ideas. Several reasons can be considered here. One is due to the input of formulas. In the early learning stages, formulas can be learned as a unit without any grammatical knowledge. When learners reproduce them, it is convenient and simple to just use them without thinking about sentence structures, especially when the formulas are capable of expressing learners’ ideas. Another is quite understandable, that saying something shorter is easier than saying something longer. However, when we assess learners’ monologic oral production, using phrases decreases the quality of accuracy and complexity. How we should evaluate the function of formulas at this point may be one of the issues to be discussed in the future.

Conclusion

This study investigated the monologic oral production of Japanese university English learners. By evaluating the fluency, complexity and accuracy of the language the subjects produced, we obtained an outline of their speaking competence, especially in monologic talking. Some factors which impact on speaking competence have been identified, such as lack of adverb phrases and conjunctions, particular verb forms, and the input of formulas. We suggest that these can be improved through classroom learning. We consider that Semantic Pattern

Practice, addressed by Yanai (2007), is an effective and practical approach in the classroom. Further study will be focused on how this approach helps learners improve their speaking competence.

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Appendix

The definitions described in *Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics*

- T-Unit also Minimal Terminable Unit
a measure of the linguistic complexity of sentences, defined as the shortest unit (the Terminable Unit, Minimal Terminable Unit, or T-Unit) which a sentence can be reduced to, and consisting of one independent clause together with whatever DEPENDENT CLAUSES are attached to it. For example the sentence *After she had eaten, Kim went to bed* would be described as containing one T-Unit.
- Type/Token In MATHEMATICAL LINGUISTICS the total number of words in a text may be referred to as the number of text tokens, and the number of different words as the number of text types. The ratio of *different* words in a text to *total* words in the text is known as the LEXICAL DENSITY or Type-Token Ratio for that text.