Fossilization Errors in Intermediate Japanese L2 Learners of English Speech : A Small-scale Inquiry

【研究ノート】

Fossilization Errors in Intermediate Japanese L2 Learners of English Speech: A Small-Scale Inquiry

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フォシラィゼイションエラー：小規模調査

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Abstract

　　Analysing second language learners (L2 learners) speech is a popular form of research in linguistics. This research observed speech errors made by Japanese learners of English currently studying at university. The research contained 6 participants, 4 female and 2 male, and involved interviewing each one of them, identifying between 2~4 grammatical inaccuracies and suggesting ways for them to improve upon them. They were then given a second interview a few weeks later to determine if any improvements were made. It was found that English articles and prepositions were a common problem for all participants, either inserting them where unnecessary or omitting them when required. The level of integration of these features within their speech suggested that they might be a result of fossilization (Selinker, 1972). The follow-up interviews showed that the participants were endeavouring to correct these mistakes. There were some good improvements, however, they found it difficult as the errors were so heavily embedded within their speech.

概要

　　第二言語学習者のスピーチ分析は言語学の人気のある研究領域の一つである。この調査では、現在大学で英語を学んでいる日本人の大学生のスピーチにおけるエラーを観察したものである。調査は女性４名、男性２名の６名の被験者を対象とし、一人一人にインタビューを行って２つから４つの文法的な間違いを確認し、その改善点を指摘した。改善が認められたかどうかを確かめるために被験者は二、三週間後に再度インタビューを受けた。被験者に共通に見られたのは冠詞と前置詞の問題で、不要な所に挿入するか、または必要なところに使用しないことが判明した。スピーチの中にこのような特徴がどの程度含まれるは、セリンカー（1972）が言うように、フォシライゼイション（専門用語：
　間違いを繰り返すことで、自然言語の一部分になる現象）の結果なのかもしれない。その後インタビューを引き続き行うことで、被験者は自分たちの間違いを直そうとしていることが分かった。ある程度の改善は認められたものの、間違いはスピーチの中にしっかりと埋め込まれているので、改善するのは難しいことが分かった。

Introduction

The differences between the Japanese and English languages are intricate and numerous. Even an introductory learner will quickly notice those features, for example the word order and the many grammatical differences; such as Japanese having no articles (Akiyama & Akiyama, 2001, p 22; Weintz, 2005, p 16) and the English equivalents of 'a, an, or the' not being present, which is a surprise and struggle for them. It is the same for Japanese learners when they study English, as they see things not present in their language. A popular area of research is with learner speech and, more so, the '*interlanguage*' (Selinker, 1972). This is a period of language study that a learner enters during learning, situated between their native language (L1) and their target language, the language they are studying, the target language (L2). It is best described as a point a learner enters which '*although neither identical to the L1 or L2, shares characteristics of both*' (Barron, 2003, p 35). While operating within the interlanguage a student may try to say something that they cannot quite construct or say in the L2. Therefore, they use their knowledge of their L1 and '*transfer*' (Ellis, 1997, p 19) elements of it, rules or grammar, to their study of the L2 thus creating their interlanguage. Whilst this could sometimes be seen to have positive effects, as it may help with confidence building or experimentation with language, helping a learner and paving the way for proficiency in the L2, it can be very negative if left unchecked. This is L1 interference, explained by Ellis as another term for '*negative transfer*' (ibid, p 52). This is where, as mentioned above, features of the L1 are taken and negatively transferred to the L2. An example of this would be when a learner applies the grammatical structure of their native tongue to English when speaking; for example, saying 'I a book bought' instead of 'I bought a book'). This can have further implications in a form known as '*fossilization*' (Selinker, 1972, p 215). Some mistakes, such as the word order or the grammatical make up of sentences (as above), if left uncorrected could become permanently embedded within their speech resulting in it becoming natural for them. Nozadze (2012) suggests a number of reasons for the occurrence of fossilized errors, with L1 interference and the lack of correction being at the top of the list. Fossilization is a very difficult aspect of language learning to overcome, as it effectively requires one to rewrite a linguistic habit they have become accustomed to. Therefore, when looking at L1 interference or fossilization, it is advisable to identify and evaluate errors in speech, and in this context the student's interlanguage. Ellis details the different type of errors encountered in '*error evaluation*' breaking them down into '*global*', errors that '*violate the overall structure of a sentence*' (1997, p 20), and '*local*', errors that '*affect only a single constituent in the sentence (for example, the verb)*' (ibid). The participants selected for this research have a long history of studying English and global errors were perceived to not be a problem but will however, not be disregarded.

There have been a number of studies that have examined Japanese learners of English and their use/understanding/application of certain aspects of English grammar, such as the works of Bong (2012) and Hayashi (2014). However, they were on a large scale with numerous participants and focused on very specific grammatical features, such as Bong's (2012) investigation of the preposition 'at'. This small-scale inquiry is not aiming to fixate on large-scale and numerous problems with L1 interference in language learning. In his paper Bennui (2008) displayed a highly detailed and intricate design of the '*approaches used in studies on L1 interference*' (p 75). However, this paper aims to identify errors on a small scale (around 2-4) and highlight

student awareness of their errors in the hope that it would lead to improvements within their L2 speech. Although it is not representative of the general population, it is hoped that findings from this research will yield some form of practical application that can be used in teaching to better help Japanese learners of English.

Aims and Hypotheses

Examining the features of language used by L2 learners of English in speech is a very broad field of study, especially for a small-scale inquiry. Language learners from different language backgrounds approach learning in different ways to others, or have difficulty with parts of the language that another may not. Consequently this was refined to focus on grammatical inaccuracies in two research questions:

- 1.1: What major grammatical errors are featured in the L2 learners' speech? The term 'major' was intentionally used, as some errors made by the learners may have been accidental and they may either correct themselves or the mistake may not be present again (e.g. they used 'I wented' once and then said 'I went' correctly on numerous occasions without incident). These errors will be noted but not discussed with the participant.

- 1.2: Are there any language similarities between the participants? English articles (a/an/the) may be a common problem as they are not present in the Japanese language. From personal experience, Japanese learners also confuse some prepositions either by omitting them where needed or adding them when not required.

- 2.0: Are there any indications of interlanguage obstacles, such as fossilization or L1 interference (negative transfer), present within their speech?

Methodology

Sample

The sample size consisted of 6 native Japanese, university students, and contained 4 females and 2 males. The participants in this research were selected as they are all at intermediate level, around CEFR (Council Of Europe, 2014) B1+~B2[1], and are also taking advanced[2] English classes at university. They thus have a very good level of English, and have had experience of either living abroad or travelling, on numerous occasions, to English speaking countries. However, in addition to this, all participants were specifically selected because

Table 1: English learning experience of participants (In inteview order)

Participant[3]	Years studying English	Study abroad[4]	Other English speaking countries visited	Exam experience
S1−F1	9 years	1 year−Canada (Uni)	USA, UK, Fiji	TOEIC x6; Eiken x2
S2−F2	15 years	1 year−USA (HS)	UK, Canada	TOEIC x2; Eiken x2
S3−M1	9 years	UK Sept. Start 2014 (Uni)	USA, Singapore, UK	TOEIC x3; Eiken x4
S4−F3	9 years	1 month − UK (Col)	USA, Singapore	Eiken x10
S5−F4	11 years	2 weeks − Australia (JHS) 2 weeks−UK (HS) 1 month−UK (Col) 6 months−USA (Uni)	N/A	TOEIC x4; TOEFL x2
S6−M2	10 years	(2 weeks)−Australia (HS)	USA	TOEIC x3; Eiken x1

they were perceived to have some form of fossilization errors embedded within their English speech. Even though they are all studying at the same intuition they are all from different parts of Japan.

Research design and data collection procedures

This research was conducted using semi-structured interviews (Dörnyei, 2007; Schauer, 2009; Pawlak & Aronin, 2014) as they '*combine the flexibility of the unstructured, open-interview with the directionality of the survey instrument*' (Schensul et al., 1999, p 149). The interview was organised where certain questions were asked to all participants (Appendix), however, personalised questions, which were intended for elaboration, and prompt question, if they misunderstood or gave short answers, were asked but not listed on the interview questionnaire.

The research was organised into 4 sections:

- Part 1: The initial interview where the participants were asked a number of questions about themselves and their English studies (Appendix) and encouraged to talk as much as they could. During this time, notes were made of easily identifiable (e.g. "I wented to the park") or continuous errors (e.g. used "and" at the start of every sentence).

- Part 2: The recorded interviews were listened to in order to better identify errors and recommend areas for improvement within the participants' speech.

- Part 3: This was to give participants feedback on their interviews. In order to avoid overwhelming, or demoralising, them with too much detailed information on things they need to improve, feedback was limited to around 2~4 items (e.g. lack of articles, over use of certain words/phrases, incorrect use of past tense). These were presented in various ways; for example, prescribed worksheets (see next section), an online activity, or given verbal advice with examples on ways to improve on their weaknesses.

- Part 4: Around two-three weeks later the students were interviewed again to examine if there was any improvement on their individual errors, discussed with them after the first set of interviews. The interview (Appendix) questioned them about their studies and holiday time, talking about the past, present and future.

Ethical considerations and limitations of the study

All participants were made aware of the aims of this research and consented to having their interviews recorded. Even though their voices were recorded, they were instructed never to use their names, or anything that could be used to directly identify them, during the interviews. In addition, throughout the research they were assigned reference codes, in order to maintain privacy. The participants were informed that they were not the only participants in the research but were not told who the others were in order to avoid them consulting with each other about the interview content, which may have resulted in them rehearsing answers for their own interview, or influencing others. As this was a small-scale inquiry, the sample size was not only small but also limited to a select number of participants from a single institution and thus cannot be generalised. The '*observer's paradox*' (Labov, 1972) was also ignored.

Table 2: Suggested items for practice and improvement

Participants	Suggestion 1	Suggestion 2	Suggestion 3	Suggestion 4
S1−F1	Articles Item 1	Prepositions Item 2, 3, 4	Word Order (discussion)	(Past Tense) Referred to class textbook
S2−F2	Articles Item 1	Prepositions Item 2, 3	Pronunciation of 'have a'	
S3−M1	Articles Item 1	Prepositions Item 2, 3, 4	Plurals of nouns (discussion)	(Pronunciation) Self-designed diagram
S4−F3	Articles Item 1	Prepositions Item 2, 3, 4	Over use of vocabulary (highlighted words)	
S5−F4	Articles Item 1	Prepositions Item 2, 3		
S6−M2	Articles Item 1	Prepositions Item 2, 3, 4	(Pronunciation) Self-designed diagram	

Results of the interviews

The following table (Table 2) shows the suggested items for the participants to focus on for improvement and thus provides answers the first, 1.1 and 1.2, research question(s):

Some of the following materials were given to students to help to raise awareness of their noted weaknesses and promote practice:

Item 1: Online practice exercises; several questions, webpage (Learning English Online, n.d.)

Item 2: Prepositions checklist; 1 page list (International Reading Association, 2003)

Item 3: Prepositions of Place 2; paged worksheet (English For Everyone, n.d.)

Item 4: Mastering articles and prepositions; (Syracuse University, 2014)

Item 5: Self−designed pronunciation sheet (see below); this is not related to grammar, however how they perceive it is a point of interest.

Results of interview 1

During the interviews, aside from articles, it became quickly apparent that all the participants struggled with prepositions in some form or another. This came as a surprise as Japanese has a number of prepositions, some are even used in an identical manner to English. In the upcoming paragraphs, the parts in italics with numbers in parentheses next to them are examples from their interview with the related time marker when they started that particular utterance.

Participant S1-F1 − her speech incorporated a number of fossilized errors. She made mistakes with the past tense (verbs) and L1 interference was heavily present. When asked about where else she visited while living in Canada she responded: "*No, only New York, when I was Canada…*" (6:03 minutes (m)). This demonstrated a lack of the preposition (in) and/or a gerund (−ing verb, i.e. living). There were well over 20 instances where prepositions were either omitted or input when not required; "*I went to the Canada for one year*" (0:35 seconds (s)). Her grammar at times reflected the Japanese word order[5], when talking about places she had not visited: "*…a lot of don't go countries.*" (沢山行っていない国; takusann itte inai *kuni*) (12:14 m). Although this could be considered as a global error, the message was still conveyed. These errors occurred

several times and were usually localised within sentences.

Participant S2-F2 － aside from sounding nervous and talking a quickly at times, her background experience of English reflected her high ability. She made enough article and prepositional mistakes to merit giving her the work sheets but these were few and far between. Instead of omitting them, she added articles where unnecessary, example, "…*in my third year of the high school.*" (0:48 s). The only unusual mistake she kept making was her contraction of 'have' and 'a', as she pronounced it very quickly as '*hava*' instead of 'have a'. This happened on numerous occasions and was therefore explained to her.

Participant S3-M1 － out of all the participants he made the most number of article and prepositional errors. He regularly omitted them, "*When, I go to UK, I'm supposed to live in flat*" (2:56 m), and added or used them incorrectly, "*I used the Singapore Airlines and at the plane I met a man*" (7:04 m). He made over 20 article errors. His use of preposition was not too bad but he did add several where unnecessary, "…*then he contacted to me*" (7:31 m). He was the only participant to have problems with countable/uncountable nouns, "*my hobbies is to go fishing and catch fishes*" (1:29 m), "*He was from an English countries*" (7:09 s), and "…*we could listen my languages in foreign countries*" (8:01 m). This only happened a few times and upon informing him of it, he said that he was aware of this particular problem and said that it was a bad habit from his high school days that he was working on. He was also the only participant to be aware of his own fossilized errors.

Participant S4-F3 － she was very calm throughout the interview. From the start she overused words, namely conjunctions. She used 'but', 'so' and 'like' too many times, usually at the start of sentences, and throughout her short 15-minute interview she used each one between 15-25 times; "*But, like sometimes…like sometimes between friends…like I don't…*" (6:17 m). Removing these out of her speech will make it sound more natural and fluent. Her use of articles and prepositions was also incorrect at times as she omitted many and, very occasionally, added items where unnecessary; "…*people whom I don't speak anymore. In the School, I can't do such things*" (7:50 m).

Participant S5-F4 － She was the most advanced participant in this research. She displayed an extremely high level of English and had very few mistakes. However; the only mistakes that she did display were the occasional exclusion of articles and prepositions, usually when following a verb; "*My hometown, it is in countryside*" (0:56 s), "*I went on a trip France*" (5:44 m), and "…*third year in the elementary school. Then, I went private school…*" (6:15 m). When told of these errors she said that although she knew that articles were an occasional problem for her she did not realise that she was making prepositional errors.

Participant S6-M2 － Unlike the other participants, he had not had much time abroad. As with all other participants he had problems with articles and prepositions. His only problem was that he omitted them; "*My hometown is very old city and very historical city*" (1:08 m), and "*If I get a job airline company*" (6:04 m) [in/at?]. He did not once add either of them where they were not needed, which was a surprise as learners usually have a mixture of the two. His omission, mainly of articles, suggests that fossilization must have emerged early on in his English studies. From the start it was also clear that despite displaying a good level of English, his pronunciation held him back. At one point he said, "*I wanted to be a pirate*" (5:32 m) and then justified why he liked aeroplanes and air travel. His pronunciation of "pilot" sounded like "pirate"; his pronunciation of the 'l' sound was almost unrecognisable throughout his interview.

At the conclusion of the first interviews, two students (M1 and M2) requested help with their English pronunciation. They mentioned that they felt frustrated as they sometimes could not create/separate certain sounds within their own speech and that it occasionally had a ripple effect on how they hear words, especially with the English 'l' and 'r'[6]. They mentioned that the IPA[7] did not completely help them in their endeavour to better improve their English pronunciation. The following diagram was designed as a means for Japanese learners of English to help them visualise and differentiate between certain sounds and practice them for themselves:

```
  ☺       愛         怒      ☹!
Light<=   L  |  R   =>Right
Tempura<=  M  |  N   =>Kenka
    Vat<=   V  |  B   => Bat
                  P=> Pat
  Sank <=  Sa | Th  =>Thank
```

Table 3: Pronunciation assistance table for Japanese learners of English (Love-Anger)

The above diagram may not follow elements established in the IPA. However, after personally testing it in several classes, it helped a number of Japanese students visualise and separate certain sounds, as it was designed especially with them in mind. (Tempura ⇒ Japanese fried food ; Kenka ⇒ Japanese word to fight / argue). The left hand column indicates softer, happier sounds (headed with the Japanese word for 'love'; 愛 ai) whereas the right column indicates harder, angrier sounds (headed with the Japanese word for 'anger'; 怒 ika -ru). One other interesting feature of these interviews was that the 4 females participants' accents, when speaking in English, were heavily influenced by North American English (US). S3-F2 and S6-F4 were particularly notable because, should they reach a higher level of spoken competence, they could very easily possibly be mistaken for native American-English speakers.

Results of interview 2

The time between the first and second series of interviews was considerably short. This time frame was deemed necessary as to keep the participants motivated to practice, as their scheduled second interview date was set and in the immediate future. However, this may also not have been long enough for them to show any drastic or immediate improvements. Despite this, all participants displayed improvements, in some form, related to their previous errors.

The most notable was participant S1-F1. She sometimes spoke quickly, appearing to not think through her responses, and had a number of embedded fossilization errors in her interlanguage speech. Her follow-up interview was two and a half weeks after her first and her speech speed was slower sounding more natural, and it was apparent that she was putting more thought into her responses. Her fossilized errors were still present but drastically reduced. She noted that she was surprised and slightly disappointed that teaching

staff in her previous institution (she is a new student) had not highlighted her mistakes. She said that her slightly slower speech speed was her way of trying to control her mistakes and deter herself from making them. Although still present, her L1 interference seemed reduced and her sentence structure was slightly amended.

Participants **S2-F2 and S5-F4** remedied a number of their errors, no longer making them a dominant problem. Both of them also corrected themselves a number times, making it seem as if they were striving to eradicate their fossilized errors. S2-F2's pronunciation of 'have a' had improved making it easier to recognise. S5-F4 almost managed to eradicate most of her mistakes. She mentioned after the interview that she had devoted a great deal of time to improving her mistakes by having regular chats with the American students in the university.

Participant S4-F3 omitted a number of articles in her first interview and as a result began over compensating by including too many articles in the 2nd interview. Her usage of prepositions had greatly improved and she said that the worksheets had really helped her. She also cut down on her usage of "but", "so", and, particularly, "like", however, acknowledged that it was a very, very difficult task for her because they were such a huge part of her speech. A side effect of this was that she spoke a little slower than before.

The two male participant **S3-M1 and S6-M2** were the most enthusiastic as they both mentioned that they had struggled with several sounds of English pronunciation for a long time. The diagram (table 3) helped them to be able to better differentiate between them. They both did however mention that they wanted more time to practice and would like to do an interview again in the future to better demonstrate their ability. S3-M1's articles and prepositional errors has only slightly improved however, his countable/ uncountable noun problem did not appear to have changed. S6-M2's article problem remained fairly unchanged, however the separation of the 'l' and 'r' sounds in his speech was a great improvement over the first interview.

Some participants mentioned that they were thankful for partaking in the research as it had highlighted, as they saw it, simple errors they were making but should not be. However, they all mentioned that, despite feeling they had improved a little, found that it was very difficult to eradicate the errors. Being aware of them was beneficial but, as they were now conscious about making them, the fact that they kept making the same mistakes unconsciously made it frustrating for them at times.

Evaluation and conclusion

A common error with all participants was their use of prepositions and articles. These were therefore, classed as fossilized errors as they appear to be deeply embedded within their speech, and the majority of participants were oblivious to them. Fossilization errors are a feature of language learning that many students encounter. It can be a severe hindrance for some or a mere part of the learning processes for others. This was a small-scale inquiry with a limited time scale and these two components may diminish the validity of this particular research, as studies into fossilization errors in the interlanguage would usually require a longer time scale and greater number of participants. L1 interference was not as big as a problem

as initially thought. It could be argued that, as Japanese does not have articles, participant implementation of them in their English speech was a problem because their L1 was interfering with their usage of them. This was disregarded as an L1 interference problem because most students used them naturally in their speech and some, despite being aware of them, were finding them difficult to rectify. This tended towards the belief of them being fossilization errors. After having extensively taught in Japanese primary and secondary schools, these are featured in the curriculum and are taught at a young age. Whether it is a fossilization problem unique to Japanese learners is currently unknown.

Despite acting as a slight advantage, the time scale of this research was a great limitation. The advantage being, as previously mentioned, keeping them motivated to practice due to the time constraints. This was in hope that they would not delay studying because a scheduled interview was within two-three weeks and not, for example next semester or in 3 months. This was also a disadvantage because certain features, such as pronunciation improvement, could be considered as an area for long-term improvement. The two male participants both mentioned this, as they needed more time for practice. Regardless of the time limit, the participants in this study were highly motivated and tried their very best. Due to the limited number of participants, 4 females and 2 males, reliable data on gender differences cannot be accurately deduced. However, the results showed that both men struggled with English pronunciation and the ladies had adopted strong accents influenced by North American English. This raises questions on gender differences and provides a platform for potential, further research.

In conclusion, as this was a small-scale inquiry, the results cannot be generalised. However, they can be used to raise awareness of article and prepositional errors for low level Japanese L2 learners of English, and the potential importunes for spending more time practicing them. This could be seen as overly optimistic as instruction is not a magical method for deterring the formation of fossilization errors within the interlanguage. Wang (2011) researched the effects of instruction on fossilization prevention and concluded that although different forms of instruction and input could help reduce the chances of fossilization errors it is 'an inevitable process' (p 72) in language learning. Zheng (2010) proposed 'models of instruction' (p 149), which could be used to help overcome fossilization. These models coupled with the areas of weakness identified in this small-scale inquiry could be combined to provide current low level, Japanese L2 learners of English with the opportunity to work on English articles and prepositions in an attempt to potentially avoid them becoming a fossilization problem in the future; this could very well help remove at least one problematic detour on the journey of language learning. This could be the basis for future research in the form of a longitudinal study tracking student progress over a number of months, or even years.

Notes

Note 1: CEFR: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Students are around B 1+~B 2 which is referred to as 'Independent user' or intermediate level.

Note 2: Advanced classes at the university are in the range of B2~C1 levels: most with stages of advancement e.g. Business English classes have 4 levels and can only be taken by 3rd and final year students.

Note 3: S = Student. F and M represent Female and Male respectively
Note 4: Uni = University; Col = College (Private college; Non−university); HS = High School; JHS = Junior High school
Note 5: Japanese word order is SOV; Subject Object Verb. English is SVO; Subject Verb Object
Note 6: The Japanese 'r' sound is a blend of 'r' and 'l' with a hint of the 'd' sound.
Note 7: International Phonetic Alphabet

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Appendix

Procedure explanation:

－Do not use name, student ID, or anything that can lead to directly identifying the participant.

－Should participant wish to stop/pause interview, make a gesture to do so.

Questions to Ask in Interview One

－Being recording－

(Greet Participant)

• Please tell me about yourself.

• Which foreign country are you most interested in? (Why)

• Think back to when you were (a child/in school). What was your best memory?

• What kind of job would you like to have in the future?

(If required:)

(Prompts － what are your hobbies? What do you do in your free time? etc...)

(Personal elaboration － when was that? What is that? Why? etc...

Thank participant

－End Recording－

Questions to Ask in Interview Two

－Being recording－

(Greet Participant and welcome them back)

• What are your plans for the summer?

• What are your thoughts of this last semester?

• Do you have any regrets/weaknesses or good memories/strengths?

• What are you looking forward to next semester?

• What are you not looking forward to next semester?

• What do you think you need to do to prepare for next semester?

• Any final comments?

(Use information from previous interview if needed).

(Use prompts or additional questions if needed).

Thank participant and wish them well.

－End Recording－

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