

## Case Study of an Oral Language Proficiency Test Analysis: How Can Teachers Learn from Data?

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**Abstract.** Do foreign language instructors really know which grammar points should be explicitly taught and why? Are instructors aware of how their classroom languages affect students' learning? This is a showcase of how foreign language instructors can use students' oral language data to explore the possibilities for more effective instruction. Subjects are students in a Japanese language immersion program in the U.S. who study Japanese as a foreign language. Their speech samples were recorded, transcribed, and examined to identify the hurdles involved in learning Japanese for English speaking children. The analysis shows that the errors in their utterances often originate from the rules which differ from ones in their first language. Also, children learn useful metalinguistic strategies to maintain the flow of conversation according to experience, while the grammatical accuracy is not gained without explicit instructions.

**Keywords:** Data analysis, oral proficiency assessment, child's second language acquisition, Japanese as a foreign language, language immersion program

Foreign language instructors always should carefully watch students' production and observe how students develop their skills; therefore, instructors can adjust the curriculum to what students really need to practice more. Students' utterances conceive rich information that indicates ease and difficulties when the students try to master the target language. By exposing the difficulties and analyzing why they are difficult, the hints for more effective teaching can be discovered. This paper is to showcase a data analysis of an oral language proficiency test and to introduce how the analysis is performed as well as the pedagogical implications are derived.

### Method

This data was collected from an oral fluency assessment that was conducted in a Japanese immersion program in the U.S.A. This school is a public school for kindergarten through eighth grade, and the most students are American citizens and English native speakers. They start learning Japanese from kindergarten level as a second language in a partial immersion setting. The particular subjects for this research

are second graders, fifth graders, sixth graders, and seventh graders as of the school year 2003, 2005, and 2007.

The data are the results of an oral proficiency test called Student Oral Proficiency Assessment (SOPA), an interview test that was originally developed in 1991 by the Center for Applied Linguistics to assess the oral proficiency and listening comprehension of elementary school students in foreign language immersion programs. One interviewer assesses two students at the same time for about 20 minutes entirely in the target language, and the utterances during the interview are recorded on videotape as well as the rater's notes.

For this study, the fifth task of the SOPA test, story retelling of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* is excerpted and transcribed to perform analysis. During this task, students were shown the book *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* without the text and encouraged to tell what happened in the story directed by the interviewer's questions like "What is the girl doing?" (pointing to Goldilocks), "Where do bears live?" "How do the bears feel?" and "What happened next?" After the utterances are transcribed, the morphology, syntax, lexicon, and semantics in their speech are examined. Especially, the error patterns are observed to highlight the difficulties and non-difficulties for English-speaking children's acquisition of Japanese. Metalinguistic strategies the students used during the interview are also examined to find out how the strategies affect students' communication skills. Metalinguistic strategies observed in this research are gesture use, English use, and syllabification of English use, onomatopoeia use to expand their vocabulary; planning time, self-correction, repetition, and questioning that are known as advanced learners' strategies; and avoidance and nodding that are often used by novice level students to express their uncertainty and comprehension of questions.

## Findings and Discussions

### Morphology

Errors in inflections of *I*-adjectives were shown in students' utterances in all grades. For example, *Ookii deshita* (→ ooki katta desu), *Ookii datta*, (→ ooki katta), and *Ookii no isu*. (→ ooki isu). Also, verb conjugation errors were found in all of students' utterances. Fewer kinds of conjugations were used by younger graders, while upper graders used more complex tenses and aspects. The *te* form ending should be only used as the imperative form; however, many students used it incorrectly and habitually. This is probably because immersion students hear this form most frequently in classrooms in instructive sentences such as *Tatte*. (= Stand up.), *Suwatte*. (= Sit down.), *Mite*. (= Look.), *Kiite*. (= Listen.), and *Shizukanishite*. (= Be quiet.). Error examples are below.

I: Onna-no-ko wa nani o shite imasu ka? (=What is the girl doing?)

S1: Tabete.

eat-te-F

→ Tabete imasu. (= Eating.)

S2: Nete.

sleep-te-F

→ Nete imasu. (= Sleeping.)

A demonstrative adjective, *kono*, and a demonstrative pronoun, *kore*, were not distinguished as the example below shows. Probably this is an English influenced error since both *kore* and *kono* are translated to *this* in English.

Kono wa atsui desu.

this top-P hot cop-fml-F

→ Kore wa atsui desu. (= This is hot.)

### Syntax

Confusions between the Japanese word order, Subject-Object-Verb, and the English word order, Subject-Verb-Object, were rarely found in all grades. Even though students replaced vocabulary with English words or gestures, still word order followed Subject-Object-Verb as below.

Onna-no-ko wa doa nokku.

girl top-P door knock <syllabification of English word>

→ Onna-no-ko wa doa o nokku shimashita. (= The girl knocked the door.)

Confusions of the particle positioning were not present, either. In English, particles are pre-positioned, but the particles used in their Japanese utterances were placed in post-position. Particle misuses, however, were found in all students' utterances, such as *beddo* o (→ de) *nemashita*, *isu* de (→ ni) *suwarimashita*, *tabemono* ga (→ o) *tabemasu*, and *beibiibea* ga (→ no) *cheaa* no (→ ga) *kowarecyatta desu*. Some of the particle misuse patterns involved the first language influence. For example, the listing particle *to* is used only for connections of nouns; however, the English connection particle *and* connects verbs and sentences as well. Examples are below.

*Kuma no ie ni itta to tabete to isu*  
 bear pos-P house plc-P go-pst-F list-P eat-te-F list-P chair  
*o kowashite to nemurimashita.*  
 d-obj-P break-te-F list-P sleep-fml-pst-F  
 → Kuma no ie ni itte, tabete, isu o kowashi, soshite, nemurimashita.  
 (= She went to bear's house, ate, broke chairs, and slept.)

Counters were not present in the most of students' utterances; therefore, the error sentences, *San kuma* and *San no kuma* (→ San biki no kuma) were common. This is probably an English influenced error as well because a part of speech, counter, is not necessary to say "three bears" in English.

## Lexicon

The number of nouns used by all graders during this story retelling was almost equal. The number of verbs increased dramatically, and adjectives increased slowly according to the grade. However, pronouns, counters, and conjunctions were used by only few students. This is possibly because content is more weighted than linguistic accuracy in the immersion programs. Though correct use of pronouns, counters, and conjunctions contributes to higher accuracy, teachers do not explicitly point out the students' misuse of them as long as the meaning is understandable. Another example is animate existence *iru* and the inanimate existence *aru*. For example, *Porijji ga imasen*. (→ Porijji ga arimasen.) is found as an error sentence, but probably most teachers do not correct the student for the minor error. Because of such a manner of immersion programs, students probably learn nouns, verbs, and adjectives, which control the core contents, more rapidly.

## Semantics

The words that are not distinguished in English meaning were misused. For example, *samui* and *tsumetai* are both 'cold' in English, but *samui* refers to ambient temperature, and *tsumetai* refers to the temperature of objects. An error example is below.

*Okaasan no porijji wa too samui.*  
 mother pos-P porridge top-P too cold for ambient temperature  
 → Okaasan no porijji wa tsumeta sugiru. (= Mother's porridge is too cold.)

## Metalinguistic strategies

The effective metalinguistic strategies, such as planning time, self-correction, and questioning were found to increase as students progressed through the grades. Novice level students used avoidance strategy saying *Wakarimasen*. (= I don't know.) or just nodding to avoid answering in words. On the other hand, older students started sentences as far as they could and were able to use questioning strategies to ask the specific part of speech that they didn't know. The following example is a dialogue of an interviewer and two students who utilized direct questioning strategies. They specified the verb they couldn't remember and asked the interviewer a help with the verb *kowasu* (= broke).

- I: Goorudiirokkusu, dooshita? (= What happened with Goldilocks?)
- S1: *Isu o koroshimashita ???*  
chair d-obj-P kill-fml-pst-F <look at the interviewer for a help>  
(= She killed the chair.)
- S2: *Isu ga wakarimasen.*  
chair sub-P <hesitation> know-neg-fml-F <direct questioning>  
(= The chair, ... I don't know.)
- I: Kowashimashita?  
break-pst-fml-F  
(= Do you mean "broke"?)
- S2: ***Kowashimashita!!!***  
(= She broke the chair.)

Strategies of English use and syllabification of English word use were shown in all students' utterances to continue the story retelling to flow. By syllabifying English words, such as *ruumu* (= room), *porijji* (= porridge), and *midiamu saizu* (= medium size), students felt their language code was not switched but just using Katakana words. Probably, this strategy was habituated by the students since their teachers use English and Japanese mixed sentences in classrooms, and they syllabify English words when they use English.

## Conclusion

By examining the students' speech, it is obvious that students copy the way their teachers speak. Data obtained from students' utterances inform teachers about what is happening in their classrooms and provide a tool for self-monitoring. Also, analysis

shows that growth in certain areas does not occur automatically especially when the error patterns involve transfer from the first language—such cases, explicit instructions should be adopted. By examining students’ utterances, possible research questions are vast: “What areas need more practice and explicit teaching?” “Which grammar rules require more experience to master?” “How can students apply the lexical knowledge to build sentences appropriately?” “How do metalinguistic strategies contribute to oral language proficiency growth?” “When and why does code-switching happen?” and “How does teacher’s talk in classroom affect students’ speech?” Through the analysis of the own data corpus, instructors can reflect on the quality of input and practices in daily teaching.

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## Appendix

### List of Abbreviations

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Table 1. Abbreviations of particles (Makino, 1989)

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-P	particle
top	topic
sub	subject
d-obj	direct object
i-obj	indirect object
sfc	surface
loc	location
plc	place
att	attribute
pos	possession
list	listing
ques	question
qut	quotation

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Table 2. Abbreviations of verb forms (Makino, 1989)

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-F	form
te	te- form
dic	dictionary form (informal nonpast)
neg	informal negative nonpast
pst	informal past
fml	formal nonpast (masu-form)
fml-neg	formal negative nonpast
fml-pst	formal past
fml-neg-pst	formal negative past
prgrs	informal nonpast progressive
neg-prgrs	informal nonpast negative progressive
fml-prgrs	formal nonpast progressive
fml-neg-prgrs	formal nonpast negative progressive
cop	copula

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