Chapter 73

A Sentence Repetition Placement Test for ESL/ EFL Learners in Japan

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ABSTRACT

Informed by psycholinguistics, an aspect of the theory of Communicative Competence, this chapter explores the predictive utility of a Sentence Repetition (Placement) Test (SRPT) for L1 Japanese English learners. A bivariate correlational analysis shows a positive correlation (r = .643) between scores on the listening segment of the TOEIC and those on a Sentence Repetition Placement Test. Data for the Sentence Repetition Placement Test was generated from university students and working professionals in Tokyo, Japan (N = 35; 25 men and 10 women). A valid Sentence Repetition Placement Test may provide the solution to ESL/EFL placement in Japan. Future research on Sentence Repetition Placement Test for ESL/EFL should address the relationship between the espoused ESL/EFL Communicative Competence objectives and policies to achieve those objectives. Within the current global environment, internal adjustments are clearly necessary to cope with external communicative demands.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment facilitates effective teaching. It allows both learners and instructors a better understanding of what is already known (Mislevy, Steinberg, & Almond, 2002), to determine the appropriate curriculum (Ramsden, 2003; Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999) for a given learner. Assessment for placement ensures that learners are neither inundated, nor subjected to ennui by a difficult or less effective curriculum (Dixon-Krauss, 1996;

Krashen, 1985). Globalization and the Information Age have foregrounded the importance of intercultural and communicative competence.

Inaccurate placement can adversely affect Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Sasaki, 1991). Assuming that effective instruction is contingent upon adequate placement (Adair-Hauck, Glisan, Koda, Swender, & Sandrock, 2006), the need for a rapid, accurate and efficient placement test becomes essential. This applies to all second language (L2) learners, including Native Language

(L1) Japanese English learners (Koike & Tanaka, 1995; Machida, 2011). Most commercial tests are inadequate in identifying learners' linguistic aptitudes and proficiency levels (Jinyan & Finn, 2009). Devoid of any placement test, learners are misplaced. Misplacement makes designing SLA materials and pedagogy impracticable (Brown, 1995). The incompatibility of curriculum objectives; teaching materials; proficiency levels, and learners' objectives, is demotivating (Wlodkowski, 2011).

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

A speedy and efficient placement instrument is wanting in Japan. The TOEIC, which is extensively used for all purposes, does not identify learner's communicative competence (Jinyan, & Finn, 2009). The current study was conducted to explore the existence of a positive, significant relationship between scores on the listening segment of the TOEIC and a Sentence Repetition Test (SRT) or Sentence Repetition Placement Test (SRPT). Note that SRT and SRPT are used interchangeable.

Language placement tests are designed to match learners to a specified curriculum (Brown, 1995). This is more significant when L1 has a greater linguistic distance from L2, as in Japanese and English. Japanese has a Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) structure (Kishimoto, 2010; Ochi, 2009), whereas the structure of English is Subject-Verb-Object (SVO). The phonological features of English qua pitch, stress, and other prosodic attributes, are of specific concern for L1 Japanese learners (Avery & Ehrlich, 2008). These features are absent from Japanese (Sanders, Neville, & Woldorff, 2002).

Accurate perception and production of English segmental sequences is often difficult for L1 Japanese (Kubozono, 1995). Because Japanese morphology is primarily restricted to a Consonant-Verb (CV) formation (Kubozono, 1995; Tamaoka & Makioka, 2009), L1 Japanese typically perceive an imaginary ending vowel for English phonemes.

This epenthetic condition makes the perception of English utterance difficult and impedes comprehension. Indirect assessment has thus far failed to mitigate these hiccups (Chapman & Newfields, 2008; Childs, 1995).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current study is based on the concept of an SR test (Meyers, Volkert, & Diep, 2000). Recent research (Devescovi & Caselli, 2007) affirmed the validity of an SR test as a reliable screening tool of SLA. Subsumed under the theory of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Coupland, 1998; Hunsinger, 2006) are psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics as subsidiary theories. Sociolinguistics explores the influence of culture on language (Schiffman, 1996). Psycholinguistics focuses on cognition (Bialystok, 2001; Swain, 2005), which involve morphophonemic and morphosyntatic coding and decoding (Rose, Feldman, & Jankowski, 2009). Domain-general cognitive processes (Bloom, 1993; Skehan, 1998) are also involved in communication. As substance of the mind, language mediates memory and thought (Baddeley, Gathercole, & Papagno, 1998).

Sociolinguistics is instrumental in intercultural and international communication (Klopf & McCroskey, 2007; Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2013) in the current globalized speech community. Intercultural communicative competence is a function of the degree to which individuals understand and identify intercultural constructs (Chaney & Martin, 2011).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Communicative competence entails the intelligible production and discernment of discourse in L2. The literature has been sated with citations of communicative competence (Bachman, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980; Leung, 2005; Planken, van Hooft, & Korzilius, 2004) from the time of

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