

EFL Japanese Adults' Performance of
Complex English Structures:
A Preliminary Experiment

KUMAGAI Misako

There has been increasing interest in seeing potential similarities between the process of L1 acquisition and L2 learning. Behind this is a nativistic view of language development. The idea is that, first of all, human beings possess some innate mechanism for language learning (often referred to as a language-acquisition device) which enables a language learner to formulate hypotheses about the structure of the language which is being learned. In other words, language learning is a process in which a learner successively modifies his tentative hypotheses until he attains the complete grammar of the language.

The regularities reported in the early 1960s in the speech of young children, such as a regular order of acquisition in certain morphemes, reflect children's creatively constructed, but tentative, set of rules that they are learning. Their systematic errors are not products of imperfect learning, but inevitable results of their applying hypothesized rules.

This view of language learning claimed by the theorists of transformational generative grammar was placed, in the late 1960s, in opposition to an 'empiricist' theory which, psychologically behaviourism and linguistically structurism, regarded L2 learning as a matter of acquiring a set of new language habits (Stern 1983:169).

Insights from L1 acquisition research based on the assumption of innateness have given new perspectives to L2 learning research, particularly to an issue of L2 learners' errors which, in a behaviouristic view, used to be ascribed totally to interference from a learner's mother

tongue.

Quite a few common errors have been found among L2 learners' data whose mother tongues vary. These errors are not only unattributable to the learners' mother tongue, but also exhibit a resemblance to those made by L1 children—the errors as part of the learner's developmental grammar.

The similarities between the types of errors in child L1 learners and in L2 learners have led researchers to envision the universal cognitive process which come into play both in L1 and L2 learning. To explain this process, Selinker (1972) hypothesizes the concept of 'interlanguage' which is thought of as a 'universal series of interim grammars which all learners would systematically work through as they acquire the new language (Hatch 1983:91).'

Some major areas of the research testing on this hypothesis have been the development of the Auxiliary system and the acquisition order of certain morphemes (Baily et al. 1974; Dulay and Burt 1975; Fathman 1975; Hatch 1978; Krashen et al. 1975; Krashen et al. 1976). Besides these studies, one area that L2 researchers have been interested in is an acquisition of a set of complex structures.

C. Chomsky (1969) tested these complex structures on children acquiring English as L1 to see whether there were any patterns of interpreting the structures. The results of her study showed that younger children had difficulties processing sentences which do not follow the 'minimal distance principle (MDP)'. The MDP, formulated by Chomsky, is a general syntactic rule of English which is based on the hypothesis that 'the noun most closely preceding the verb, particularly in a complement phrase, will be treated as the subject (de Villiers and de Villiers 1978:118).'

According to this rules, in the following sentences,

- (i) John is eager to see.
- (ii) John wanted Mary to stay.
- (iii) John told Sally what to do.

John is the implicit subject of the complement verb *see* as well as the surface structure subject. Similarly, it is *Mary* and *Sally* who are to *stay* and *do* something, respectively.

However, there are a few exceptions to this principle. Look at the following sentences which are superficially similar to the sentences (i), (ii) and (iii).

(iv) John is easy to see.

(v) John promised Mary to stay.

(vi) John asked Sally what to do.

In sentence (iv), the subject of *see* is not *John* but someone else. *John* is actually the implicit object of the complement verb *see*. The younger children, misconstruing the surface subject as being the deep structure subject, interpreted this type of sentence as *John can be seen easily*.

The verb *promise* in sentence (v) consistently violates the MDP. Thus, it is *John*, not *Mary*, who is doing the staying. The verb *ask* follows the MDP in some sentences and violates it in still others. In sentence (vi) it is *John* who is doing something. The younger children in Chomsky who had not learned yet that the verbs *promise* and *ask* do not conform to the rule failed in interpreting sentences of these types. Also, they gave *ask* the meaning of *tell*.

Cromer (1970) replicated Chomsky's experiment using the *eager/easy*-type structure with adjectives of three different types: (i) ones which always indicate that the surface and deep subjects coincide (ex. *glad*); (ii) ones which always indicate that someone other than the surface subject is the actor (ex. *easy*); (iii) and ones which are ambiguous, i.e., the interpretation of actor or deep subject depends on the context (ex. *nice*). According to the results, Cromer grouped his subjects (English speaking children) into three categories which corresponded to the stages of the children's syntactic development: (1) Primitive Rule Users—interpreted the surface structure subject as being identical with the subject of the embedded sentence, regardless of the deep structure of the sentence; (2) Intermediates—gave mixed answers; (3) Passers—distinguished the

two deep structures correctly.

Cook (1974), using Cromer's test materials, tested sixty-seven adult ESL learners from fifteen different mother tongues on the *eager/easy* distinction and found three developmental stages similar to those in Cromer's study. There seemed to be similarities in the way that native children of English and ESL adults perceive the *eager/easy* structure.

d'Anglejan and Tucker (1975) investigated the acquisition by ESL adult learners of the same set of complex English structures as Chomsky had used in her study. Their subjects, whose mother tongue was French, were divided into two different levels of proficiency in English—beginners (BEG) and advanced (ADV). A group of native speakers (NS) was used as a control group. The results showed a similar developmental pattern of the acquisition of the complex structures. The performance of the beginners was analogous to that of the youngest children in Chomsky's group. Responses of the advanced learners to the complex structures were close to those of the native speakers.

This paper describes a duplicate of d'Anglejan and Tucker's study on Japanese adults learning English as a foreign language. The purpose of this preliminary test is to examine whether learners whose mother tongue is far less close than French to the target language, English, have similar problems with the complex structures. The test structures and overall procedure followed d'Anglejan and Tucker's.

METHOD:

Subjects(Ss) The Ss are three Japanese adults (H, housewife; M, graduate student; W, housewife). They are college graduates in their mid-twenties with eight-years of English instruction in Japan under a formal schooling situation (six years at the secondary level and two years at the college level). H did not have any other English lessons privately. M went to Berlitz for two months in Japan and has read quite a few

EFL Japanese Adults' Performance of
Complex English Structures: A Preliminary Experiment

textbooks of business administration in English. W received private lessons from a native speaker of English for a few months. At school they were taught mainly by traditional grammar-translation methods. Although no proficiency test was given to them to identify their English ability, it would be safe to classify them as intermediate learners.

Materials The same set of sentences and three pairs of pictures from d'Anglejan and Tucker's study were used. Some proper names in the sentences were changed to other names which are thought to be more familiar to Japanese learners.

TASK 1 The *eager/easy*-type. There are five target sentences, i.e., sentences concerning *easy*-type adjectives. They are sentences in which the deep structure subject and the surface structure subject do not coincide. The implicit deep subject should be recovered by the Ss in order to interpret the sentences correctly.

TASK 2 The *want/promise*-type. There are three target sentences, i.e., sentences involving *promise* which violates the MDP.

TASK 3 The *ask/tell*-type. The verb *ask* in some cases does not admit the application of the MDP. Three pairs of pictures illustrating the two possible interpretations of each of six test sentences were used. Three of the six are target sentences, i.e., sentences containing *ask*.

The whole lists of the sentences and the pictures are shown in Appendix 1. The sentences were presented in the listed order. All the target sentences are marked by circles around the numbers in front of the sentences.

Procedure For each task, the experimenter read each test sentence aloud, then asked a simple question probing the S's comprehension of the meaning of the sentence. A test sentence and a question were repeated if necessary. Translations of isolated vocabulary items were given if necessary. No time limit was set. For Task 3, a pair of pictures was

EFL Japanese Adults' Performance of
Complex English Structures: A Preliminary Experiment

shown simultaneously to the S. The S was asked to choose the picture illustrating the correct interpretation of the test sentence given to him or her.

RESULTS:

All the results of the Ss in Tasks 1, 2 and 3 are compiled in Table 1. For the purpose of comparison, the results of d'Anglejan and Tucker's research is shown in Table 2.

Table 1 Errors in Tasks 1, 2 and 3

Subjects	TASK 1					TASK 2					TASK 3															
	target			control		target		control			target		control													
	3	5	6	8	10	1	2	4	7	9	3	5	9	2	4	6	7	8	10	11	1	4	6	2	3	5
H																					■	■	■	■	■	
M												■									■	■	■			
W	■	■		■										■							■	■	■			■

Table 2 Proportions of Error for Target and Control Sentences in Tasks 1, 2 and 3

	TASK 1		TASK 2		TASK 3	
	target	control	target	control	target	control
BEG	.73	.01	.25	.19	.50	.17
ADV	.14	.02	.04	.05	.13	.13
NS	.00	.00	.07	.01	.008	.13

BEG: beginners ADV: advanced NS: native speakers
N=20 for each group

In Task 1, no Ss made errors on the control sentences. W, giving wrong answers to three target sentences out of five, confused *easy*-type sentences with *eager*-type sentences. Yet, the error scores for the Ss are

rather low and their performance in this section could be said to be similar to that of the ADV learners in d'Anglejan and Tucker's study.

In Task 2, one error was made by W on a control sentence, No. 6, which might be a lapse of attention of the subject. The Ss had little difficulty in processing the target sentences involving the verb *promise* which violates the general rule MDP. As in Task 1, the Ss' performance was similar to that of the ADV learners.

In contrast to their performance in Tasks 1 and 2, in Task 3 the Ss showed a different pattern of responses to the target sentences from the performance of the ADV group on the same items. The ADV learners were able to assign the correct subject to the complement verb in the *ask* structure. In processing a sentence such as *The girl asked the boy what to paint*, for instance, the ADV learners chose *the girl* as the underlying subject of the verb *paint*. Our Ss, on the other hand, failed in processing the verb *ask*, and treated it as if it were *tell*. Therefore the underlying subject of *paint* was chosen in accordance with the MDP. Thus, in their comprehension, it was *the boy* who paints. The *ask* structure used in Task 3 might be particularly difficult for the Ss in contrast to the structures in Tasks 1 and 2.

According to Chomsky (1969 : 53-54), L1 young children pass through five stages, from Stage A to Stage E, in the process of their acquiring the *ask* structure. Superficially, our Ss appeared to be at Stage D, the fourth stage in the five developmental stages. In Stage D, the young children in Chomsky's investigations were able to distinguish *ask* and *tell* as two different words, but unable to assign the correct underlying subject to the complement verb in the *ask* structure. They over-applied the MDP to the verb *ask*.

Another difference between the Ss in this experiment and the ADV group is that more control sentence errors were made by the Ss in Task 3. The performance on the control sentences is worse than that of the BEG group. This result leads us to consider the case of a boy in Chomsky's experiments who got both his *tells* and his *asks* wrong.

Chomsky interpreted the responses of this boy to mean that 'he has abandoned stage A (all *tell*) and begun to introduce *ask*, albeit imperfectly as yet. He is in a state of transition between interpreting everything as *tell*, and correctly differentiating *ask* and *tell* (1969:61)'.

It is questionable, however, that the Ss would follow the same developmental stages as revealed by L1 children in Chomsky's study. At least, the Ss would not start from Stage A in which the two verbs, *ask* and *tell*, are not perceived as two different words. Although it is not proven in this experiment, there is a good possibility from the overall observation that, besides the degree of linguistic complexity inherent in the *ask* structure, classroom instruction in Japan could be an influential factor for the Ss on processing the structure. With respect to Japanese classroom instruction, some influence from their native language, Japanese, should be taken into consideration when the Ss' performances on Task 3 are to be investigated.

In order to see whether Japanese adult learners of English would follow the stages of *ask/tell* development proposed by Chomsky, we need to investigate more adult learners on various levels of English ability not only on the target sentences in Task 3 (*The girl asked the boy what to paint*) but on other types of sentences containing the verb *ask* (*Ask Jim what colour this is* and *Ask Jim his last name*). These sentences, according to Chomsky, are supposed to be learned earlier.

CONCLUSION:

The Ss in this experiment performed much the same as the ADV group both on the *eager/easy*-type and the *promise*-type structures. In dealing with the *ask*-type structure, the Ss performed differently from that of the ADV group. They incorrectly processed sentences such as *The girl asked the boy what to paint* to mean *what the boy should paint* rather than *what the girl should paint*. They appeared not to have learned that the verb *ask* is an exception to the general rule MDP.

Whether the Ss would pass through similar developmental stages

EFL Japanese Adults' Performance of
Complex English Structures: A Preliminary Experiment

as L1 children do should be left to further investigations with more Japanese adult learners of English on two other types of the *ask* structure. Whether other factors such as classroom instruction peculiar to Japanese learners or the linguistic complexity inherent in the structure at issue influences the processing of *ask*-type structures should also be investigated.

I am grateful to Mr. J. E. Matthews, who checked and improved my English.

EFL Japanese Adults' Performance of
Complex English Structures: A Preliminary Experiment

Appendix 1

TASK 1

- 1 Mary is anxious to go.
Who will go?
- 2 The salesman is happy to oblige.
Who will oblige?
- ③ The President is difficult to see.
Who will see?
- 4 Peter is pleased to stay.
Who will stay?
- ⑤ The scientist is interesting to interview.
Who is doing the interviewing?
- ⑥ Christine is easy to influence.
Who is doing the influencing?
- 7 John is sad to leave.
Who will leave?
- ⑧ The Russian is hard to understand.
Who does not understand?
- 9 Jack is eager to return.
Who will return?
- ⑩ Susan is fun to visit.
Who will visit?

TASK 2

- 1 The child asked the teacher to leave the room.
Who should leave the room?
- 2 The man told George to open his window.
Who will open the window?
- ③ William promised Harry to leave quickly.
Who will leave?
- 4 Bill persuaded Jack to read his letter.
Who will read the letter?

EFL Japanese Adults' Performance of
Complex English Structures: A Preliminary Experiment

- ⑤ Andy promised him to lend him his bicycle.
Who does the bicycle belong to?
- 6 George warned Harry to drive carefully.
Who should drive carefully?
- 7 William advised Tom to leave quickly.
Who should leave?
- 8 Mick asked Sam to lend him his car.
Who does the car belong to?
- ⑨ Jim promised Peter to read his letter.
Who will read the letter?
- 10 Joe ordered Bill to come quickly.
Who will come?
- 11 Bob allowed William to stay.
Who will stay?
- 12 The teacher asked the child to leave the room.
Who should leave the room?

TASK 3

- ① The girl asks the boy what to paint.
Which picture shows the girl asking the boy what to paint?
- 2 The girl tells the boy what glass to choose.
Which picture shows the girl telling the boy what glass to choose?
- 3 The boy tells the girl what shoes to wear.
Which picture shows the boy telling the girl what shoes to wear?
- ④ The girl asks the boy what glass to choose.
Which picture shows the girl asking the boy what glass to choose?
- 5 The girl tells the boy what to paint.
Which picture shows the girl telling the boy what to

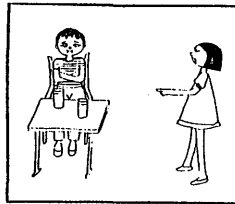
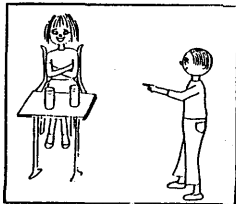
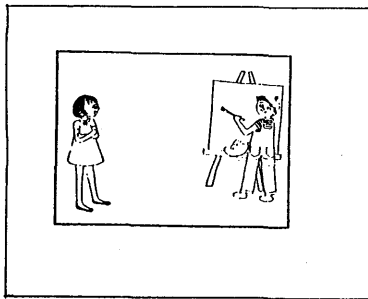
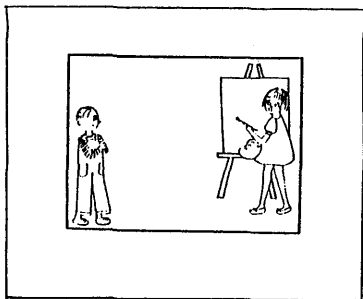
EFL Japanese Adults' Performance of
Complex English Structures: A Preliminary Experiment

paint?

- ⑥ The boy asks the girl what shoes to wear.

Which picture shows the boy asking the girl what shoes to wear?

Pictures



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EFL Japanese Adults' Performance of
Complex English Structures: A Preliminary Experiment

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