Evaluating L1 and L2 Spoken Narratives of Japanese College Students

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This study examines the spoken English of Japanese college students and analyzes factors that are important for effective communication in English. The subjects were asked to watch a short documentary video in Japanese and explain it in English. After one week the subjects explained the story again in Japanese. Their oral production, both in English and Japanese, was recorded and rated by three bilingual examiners in terms of Content, Organization, Style, and Articulation. In addition, the subjects took the TOEFL.

The results of the correlational studies revealed the following points: 1) In general, good English speakers were also good Japanese speakers; 2) Abilities of expressing an adequate amount of Content with correct linguistic Style seemed to affect the outcomes of spoken English; and 3) TOEFL scores alone were not likely to be reliable indicators of English speaking ability.

1. Introduction

The English speaking ability of nonnative speakers is usually examined in terms of fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and other sociolinguistic features. In this kind of assessment, more weight is given to linguistic aspects of the speech than to the content and organization of the speech. However, when nonnative speakers speak English, the task is often to convey the information effectively to the listener. Brown & Yule (1983) call this information-transferring function the transactional function of language and distinguish it from the interactional function of language, which is the function to maintain social relationships. Transactional spoken language is frequently concerned with getting things done in the real world — a fundamental skill for nonnative speakers. In doing so, the ability to sort out, restructure, and express the information is an important key to be a good speaker.

One of the areas in which the transactional type of oral production is under investigation is the study of comprehensibility of international teaching assistants (ITA). In this field, not only is ITAs' nonnative-like pronunciation being studied but also the discourse of their speech is being explored. Williams (1992), for example, suggests that the explicit marking of discourse structure is a crucial element of the comprehensibility of the nonnative speaker's production.

The other area which provides insight into the present study is the field of L2 writing research. Extensive research on contrastive rhetoric — the study of culturally preferred rhetorical patterns and their influence on L2 writing — has been conducted to this date. It is reported that the rhetorical difference in L2

writing can cause comprehension problems for a native speaker reader because the reader has different expectations toward a piece of writing. According to Connor & McCagg (1987), however, in their information recalling task in writing, no indication of culture-specific rhetorical patterns were observed. The reason, they argue, is that rather than exhibiting native language patterns of information organization, the nonnative English students appear to be inhibited or constrained by the structure of the original passage.

The present study examines the spoken English ability of Japanese college students and analyzes factors that are important for effective communication in English. After watching a short video, the subjects orally reconstructed the story both in English and later in Japanese. Their oral production was recorded and rated in terms of Content, Organization, Style and Articulation. The rating scale was developed for this study by adapting Hughey et al. (1983) "ESL Composition Profile" and U.S. Foreign Service Institute rating scale for oral interviews. Based on statistical analyses, the following points will be discussed: 1) Whether or not good English speakers are also skillful Japanese speakers; 2) which of the four factors — i. e., Content, Organization, Style and Articulation — is most critical for good spoken English; and 3) whether or not TOEFL scores are reliable indicators of English speaking ability.

2. Methodology

2.1 *Subjects*

The subjects were 29 first and second-year university students majoring in International Relations and Business Administration. All of them experienced six years of high school English education and some had another year of English at college. Six of them had lived in the United States for half a year as part of their course work. The others had never lived in a foreign country.

2.2 *Recording procedure*

In a language laboratory, the subjects were asked to watch a short documentary video in Japanese and explain the story in both English and

Japanese. The story was about an international marriage between a Japanese woman and a Pakistani man. The couple had a hard time living in Japan, because the woman's parents did not like their daughter's marrying a foreigner and would not see him. While watching this video, the subjects took notes. After the video, they were given three minutes to review the story silently by looking at their notes and then were instructed to reconstruct the story in English. They were then told that they should explain the story just as they would explain it to a friend. They spoke into a microphone without looking at their notes while their oral production was recorded. The tape recorders were stopped after about three minutes. Most subjects completed the story within three minutes, but some of the subjects quit speaking halfway through without knowing what to tell and how to tell the story. After the English speaking task, the following week they watched the same video and explained the story again, this time in Japanese. Their oral production was recorded just as in the English speaking task.

2.3 *TOEFL*

Prior to this recording, the subjects had taken three sections of the institutional TOEFL: Listening, Grammar, and Vocabulary and Reading sections. The highest total score reported was 564 and the lowest 403. The mean score was 451.55.

2.4 *Rating*

Subjects' oral production was rated by three bilingual examiners. The tapes of the subjects' production in English and Japanese were played separately and randomly so that the raters could not compare the scores of the two languages for any given speaker. A seven-point rating scale with a table of specifications was developed to grade the production of the subjects. The focus of the rating was on Content, Organization, Style, and Articulation. The Content of each subject's story was rated based on the complexity of the production. Organization meant cohesion and coherence of the story. For Style, linguistic features such as sentence complexity, grammatical accuracy and vocabulary use were rated. Articulation involved accuracy and clarity of pronunciation and appropriateness of presentation speed and voice quality.

2.5 *Treatment of the data*

Following completion of the rating, the data was subjected to statistical analyses. Pearson Correlation Coefficients were calculated to observe 1) the correlation between the total scores of English and Japanese oral production, 2) the correlations among the four factors—i.e., Content, Organization, Style and Articulation of the two languages, and 3) the correlation between the total scores of English production and those of the TOEFL.

3. Results and Discussion

Naturally, the subjects received higher scores from telling the story in Japanese than from English as shown in Table 1. The means of the total scores given to English and Japanese production were 14.23 and 16.48 out of total 28 respectively. These scores were proved reliable as a result of the calculation of inter-rater reliabilities with mean total scores of 0.70 for English and 0.74 for Japanese.

3.1 *Correlation between English and Japanese production*

The total scores of English and Japanese were then compared to examine our first question, that is, whether or not good English speakers are also skillful Japanese speakers. In order to examine this, Person Correlation Coefficients for the total scores of both languages were run. It was found that these scores were significantly correlated ($r=0.41$, $p<0.05$). The results indicated that those subjects who scored high in English also scored high in Japanese. On the other hand, subjects with lower scores in Japanese obtained lower scores in English. This point could yield our first general hypothesis: "Being competent in one language can have a positive effect on speaking another language."

3.2 *Content, Organization, Style, and Articulation*

The second question raised was which of the four factors—that is, Content, Organization, Style, and Articulation—was most critical for good spoken English. Before examining this point, let us first begin by comparing the subjects' scores given to these four factors. Table 2 shows the mean scores and standard deviations of the factors in English, and Table 3 indicates those in Japanese. It was clear that in all of the four factors, the subjects were more skillful in their

native language. T-tests revealed that in each of the four factors, there was a significant difference between the Japanese mean and the English mean as shown in Table 4. Those results indicated that in all of the four factors, the subjects were generally more competent in Japanese than in English.

Now, we would like to go back to our second question: "Which of the factors was more important for good spoken English?" In order to answer this question, Pearson Correlation Coefficients were employed to see if there would be any correlation between factors and if there would be a factor standing by itself. It was hypothesized that if there were any factors correlating with each other, they could indicate features playing important roles in speaking. Additionally, if there were factor standing alone, this could define the parameters of being a good English speaker.

The results of the correlational studies among the factors are in Tables 4 and 5. As for the first correlational study between two different factors in English, the mean scores correlated with one another at the significant level (Table 4). This indicates that a subject with a high score in Content, for example, is likely to have demonstrated being proficient in Organization, Style, and Articulation at the same time. A subject proficient in Organization seems to have been competent in Content, Style, and Articulation, and so on. None of the factors were independent of one another. Thus, within our framework, no factor was any more important than any other factor. This leads to our second hypothesis: "Getting better in speaking a foreign language means improving many aspects of speaking skills."

Table 5 indicates the results of the second correlational study between the scores of factors in both languages i.e., those of the correlational study between the English factor and Japanese counterparts. As mentioned before, we were particularly interested in finding out whether or not good English speakers were also good speakers of Japanese, and what the features were in Japanese which possibly affected the quality of spoken English. Before running this correlational study, it was hypothesized that if there were a Japanese factor correlating with its English counterpart, some features relating to that Japanese factor could be transferred to English. We hoped isolate and determine what those features were.

As indicated in Table 5, there were some Japanese factors significantly correlated with the English factors, namely those of Organization and Articulation. It seemed that some strategies used for Organization and Articulation were transferred to their speaking ability in English.

In Organization, the subjects' sensitivity of organizing information seemed to affect their production in English. In Japanese rhetorical organization in writing, there is a pattern called 'Ki-sho-ten-ketsu.' 'Ki' is the introduction, 'sho' means the first body, 'ten' is the second body, and 'ketsu' is the conclusion. However, in the Japanese and English tasks in this study, the subjects were not likely to use this pattern. Most subjects presented propositions in a similar order as the video did, except for the beginning part; many included an introduction in their story. Other than this, most subjects, both in English and Japanese, tended to organize the story in a similar manner, and their sensitivity to the cohesion and coherence seemed to affect their scores on Organization.

The English and Japanese mean scores for Articulation correlated. A possible explanation for this is that such features in Articulation as presentation speed, pronunciation and voice quality transferred from Japanese to English. Probably, abilities related to those articulatory features transferred relatively easily.

While Japanese and English scores for both Organization and Articulation correlated significantly, there were factors which did not correlate with their Japanese counterparts, namely those of Content and Style. In the English task of this study, because of the language barrier, the subjects generally could not include as much information as they did in the Japanese task as their vocabulary was limited. This suggested the following hypothesis: "Style would be the least attainable factor, and thereby the acquisition of Style could facilitate proficient spoken English."

3.3 *Correlation between English production and TOEFL*
The third question of this study was "whether or not TOEFL scores are reliable indicators of English speaking ability." In order to answer this question, Pearson Correlation Coefficients were used to examine whether total scores of English production and those of TOEFL would be correlated. It was found that there was no significant correlation between them. Then, another correlational

study was run to see if the subscores on the TOEFL, that is, those of Listening, Grammar and Reading sections could be indicators of the subjects' English speaking ability. None of the TOEFL subscores correlated with scores of Content, Organization, Style, and Articulation at the significant level. Thus, it can be concluded that "TOEFL scores alone cannot be a reliable indicator of English speaking ability."

4 Conclusion

In this study, the following three questions were raised: 1) Whether or not good English speakers were also skillful Japanese speakers; 2) which of the four factors—Content, Organization, Style, and Articulation—was most critical for good spoken English; and 3) whether or not TOEFL scores were reliable indicators of English speaking ability. In order to answer these questions, Japanese students' spoken productions both in English and in Japanese were scored, and the results and their TOEFL scores were examined. The results of our correlational studies reveal several implications. In general, good English speakers were also good Japanese speakers. Second, the ability.

There are several points that should be taken into consideration for a future study. In this study, only quantitative analyses were conducted in the aim of examining our hypotheses. However, qualitative analyses of the transcripts of the subjects' oral production could have yielded different insights concerning features of being a good English speaker. In addition, the evaluation of recorded speech cannot escape subjective judgment entirely. Even though inter-rater reliability indicated significant correlations for some factors, objectivity can be improved by revising the rating scale and procedures of the experiment. As for the subjects, most of them are considered to be at an intermediate level of English proficiency. If the range of their ability were a little more varied, the correlation of the TOEFL scores and the scores given to their oral production might have indicated a different pattern.

Table 1 Results of English and Japanese production

	Mean	SD	Max	Min
EALL	14.23	2.79	20.33	9.33
JALL	16.48	2.69	22.00	10.67

Table 2 Means of English factors

	Mean	SD
EC	3.37	0.89
EO	3.39	0.72
ES	3.68	0.68
EA	3.78	0.89

Table 3 Means of Japanese factors

	Mean	SD
JC	4.05	0.93
JO	4.06	0.72
JS	4.08	0.76
JA	4.30	0.82

Table 4 Correlation matrix of English factors

	EC	EO	ES	EA
EC	--			
EO	0.84**	--		
ES	0.63**	0.70**	--	
EA	0.63**	0.62**	0.76**	--

$** p<0.01$

Table 5 Correlation between English factors and their Japanese counterparts

	EC	EO	ES	EA
JC	0.27	--	--	--
JO	--	0.42*	--	--
JS	--	--	0.33	--
JA	--	--	--	0.38*

$* p<0.05$

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