

Variation across Proficiency Levels in L2 Spoken English

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Learner corpora have the potential to clarify our understanding of interlanguage development. However, few attempts have been made to provide persuasive results about language development that can be applied in language teaching and assessment materials (Pendar & Chapelle, 2008). Consequently, it is still not clear which linguistic features discriminate different developmental stages. Despite early work in SLA, relatively few researchers have been concerned with the development of oral proficiency and have described the interlanguage development from multiple perspectives. More specifically, the number of targeted linguistic features in previous SLA studies is limited (Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1998). This results in an insufficient understanding of comprehensive overview of the characteristics of interlanguages.

This study aims to investigate the overall patterns of variation in learner language across seven oral proficiency levels of Japanese EFL learners and to compare variation in native and non-native speakers of English. In order to achieve this purpose a methodological approach combining learner corpus, language processing techniques, and multivariate statistical analysis was used to identify the frequent linguistic co-occurrence patterns from over one million running words of L2 spoken English. After calculating the frequencies of 57 linguistic features, which have been shown to distinguish text and style variation in Biber (1988), multivariate statistical analyses were performed to identify the linguistic features that distinguish Japanese EFL learners' oral proficiency levels and discriminate them from the oral production of native speakers of English.

As the frequencies of specific linguistic features have a central role in this study, the largest spoken learner corpus in Japan, the National Institute of Information and Communications Technology Japanese Learner English (NICT JLE) Corpus (Izumi, Uchimoto, & Isahara, 2004), which consists of spoken interview transcripts of over 1,200 learners who have taken the Standard Speaking Test (SST), was chosen. This oral English test was constructed on the basis of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language Oral Proficiency Interview (ACTFL OPI) and designed to evaluate Japanese EFL learners. The individual scripts are coded with the oral proficiency level, which is approximately equal to a Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) range of 356 to 921 by certified raters, and the scripts can be compared with data gathered from native speakers of English who performed identical speaking tasks.

The following research questions were investigated: (a) what linguistic features distinguish English oral proficiency levels of Japanese EFL learners? and (b) what linguistic features distinguish the differences between native and non-native speakers of English? The study revealed four significant groups of linguistic features that discriminate oral proficiency levels and native and non-native speakers of English: (a) pronominal features, (b) pronouns

and *do* as pro-verb, (c) nominal features, and (d) degree adverbs and degree modifier. Additionally, negation and coordination were shown as a sign of second language (L2) development, and various ways of development of syntactic complexity such as relative and subordinate clauses were shown in the results.

Linguistic features drawn from quantitative analysis can be discussed in terms of how learner language moves through the development of: (a) personal and impersonal topic of the speaking task, (b) referential function, (c) informational density, and (d) pragmatic sophistication to provide with qualitative interpretation. They can be also discussed from the aspects of input, cognitive factors and first language (L1) influence. The study contributes to our understanding of the distinguishing characteristics of learner language at a wide range of proficiency levels and the differences between native and non-native speakers of English.

References

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