Reflecting on your own language: An ANU case study of Advanced Japanese

Yuki Itani-Adams (Yuki.Itani-Adams@anu.edu.au)
School of Culture, History and Language, The Australian National University

INTRODUCTION

Ideally the development of second language proficiency should include not only linguistic knowledge and skills but also pragmatic and socio-cultural knowledge. Second language learners need to be able to respond appropriately in native-speaker (NS) and non-native-speaker (NNS) contact situations. This poster presentation reports on a research project carried out in an advanced Japanese language course at the Australian National University in 2012, with a particular focus on one of the tasks in the project. Students were required to prepare and conduct interviews, in order to present an academic analysis of a particular social or cultural issue confronting contemporary Japan, with Japanese NS. Students were then required to transcribe their NS-NNS interaction, and analyse the linguistic and socio-pragmatic features of their own Japanese language usage.

CONTEXT

What Promotes Language Learning?

Comprehensible output theory (Swain’s 1985, 2000) : Swain argues that through needs to produce comprehensible output learners notice gaps in their own current interlanguage and the target language. This forces them to divide the output into syntactic and semantic processing. The importance of noticing is also argued by Schmidt (1990, 2001) in his noticing hypothesis.

The Interaction hypothesis (e.g., Long 1996): Conversational interaction is also argued to be an essential condition for second language learning in the interactional hypothesis. When meaning needs to be negotiated between the speaker and the interlocutor, this creates opportunities for corrective feedback.

Developmental Readiness

Teachability hypothesis (Kellfner, Plenennann, & Mansouri, 2011; Plenennann, 1998, 2005): Language learning is more effective when learners are developmentally ready to process the target form. Learners develop at different rates and each learner is at a different developmental readiness. This raises the importance of individualizing their learning experience in the classroom teaching context.

A Challenge for Language Educators: To create an environment and tasks where students can engage in meaningful interaction using the target language, notice the gaps between their own interlanguage and the target language, receive corrective feedback, and progress in language learning matching their own developmental readiness. The task should not only target the linguistic features but also socio-pragmatic features of the language.

THE STUDENT RESEARCH PROJECT IN ANU ADVANCED JAPANESE LANGUAGE COURSE


This course was delivered through a number of themes of language, culture and society in current Japan, e.g., environmental issues, attitude towards marriage among youth. The aim of the course was for students to progress in their four communication skills through studying the thematic modules. The course comprised of three hours of classes per week, a one-hour seminar style class and a two-hour tutorials. There were 48 students.

The Project

The project accounted for 50% of the overall course assessment. Students were required, in groups of three, to research deeper into one of the module topics introduced in the course and present to the class. In the process of gathering data and information, each student was required individually to interview a Japanese NS, read a minimum of one print media sources, and watch a minimum of one piece of audio-visual media sources. The project was divided into three stages:

- Part A: Interview transcription and analysis (15%)
- Part B: Group presentation (20%)
- Part C: Individual research paper (15%)

In the stage Part A, the students were asked to

- Transcribe their interview and analyse the linguistic and socio-pragmatic features of their own Japanese language usage.
- Write a report on their successful and unsuccessful communication (i.e., comprehension breakdown), analyse possible reasons for them and the strategies they or their interlocutors used to mend the communication.
- Identify non-target like usage of their Japanese, and explain and correct their own errors.

Students’ OWN ASSESSMENT OF THEIR LANGUAGE USE

Students assessed their own politeness during their interviews. Levels of politeness are determined by the relationship between the participants and the setting of the interaction. Some students chose a casual register because of their relationship with their interviewees. However, many students chose to use a more polite register due to the setting and their unfamiliar relationship with the interviewees. They found that they began the interview with a polite register - as they had practiced before the interview - but failed to maintain the level of politeness when the discussion became interesting. This indicates that, at the advanced level, they are not yet able to continuously pay attention to language styles and content of conversation simultaneously.

A number of students reported that they did not experience unsuccessful communication. The reasons they gave for their success was that they practiced questions thoroughly before the interview. While this is a good strategy to use, as students themselves noted, many of these interviews had a tendency to be a simple question-answer interaction without developing into a natural spontaneous conversation.

Vocabulary appeared to be the largest factor for unsuccessful communication. The strategies which appeared most used were asking for clarification and re-phrasing by both students and their interviewees.

STUDENTS’ EVALUATION OF THE TASK

This section presents the students’ evaluation of the task described above.

27 students participated in the evaluation survey of the particular task. As can be seen in Fig.1, 85% of the students felt that the task helped their learning of Japanese. Fig. 2 shows that 81% thought that critical analysis of their own linguistic errors helped their learning of Japanese. Many of the individual student comments indicated that these tasks ‘helped [them]’ to identify the gap between [their] level of knowledge and what [they] do not yet know’.

Other students’ comments included:

- The task had to use all the four skills.
- What was most beneficial for my Japanese was hearing my own voice and comparing my interview to the Japanese speaker’s intonation. I noticed the fact I do not use many particles and polite forms which I did not realise before.
- Learnt different usage of words and expressions in varying situations

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Through the task presented here, students indicated that they noticed their own current usage of Japanese and hence realised areas where they needed to pay attention to improve. The task incorporated the four language skills, and it was an individualised task. While all students noticed where they needed to improve, there was also a comment from a student that this task helped her realise just how much she could already use and understand Japanese. The task presents pedagogical values in promoting language learning in a classroom learning context.

REFERENCES


