"That's all. Thank you."
Emergence of Formulaic Protocols among Japanese EFL Learners

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Abstract

This presentation describes how formulaic protocols emerge in oral interactions among Japanese EFL learners in college freshman English classes. In this class, the students are organized into groups of three and respond to questions orally presented by other students. The groupings change each week over a period of 30 weeks in a school year. They are instructed to say their numbers and names each time before they read the questions aloud or answer them. Some choose to do so constantly in Japanese and others in English but some others change the language according to what others do in the same group. How they terminate their responses also change over time and certain relatively fixed patterns of expressions may permeate among the students in a class.

1   Introduction

Acquisition of communicative competence has become one of the most important objectives of English language education in Japan. Asking the right questions at the right time and responding to them directly and immediately are integral parts of successful oral interactions in the North American context, but Japanese learners of English experience linguistic, socio-cultural and cognitive difficulties in doing so. In an effort to remedy this problem, we introduced what we call "oral response practice," in which students are organized into groups of three and try to respond to questions posed by other students in the same group. Those interactions are recorded with digital audio / video recording equipments and some of the materials are transcribed and annotated.

2   Oral Response Practice

For various reasons, the numbers of the students in the freshman English classes where the data collections take place are from 15 to 36. For each session, ten questions pertaining to one particular topic for the week, such as self-introductions, decisions, and plans for the summer, are prepared in advance and printed on business-card size pieces of paper. The students in one group have three roles to play, the questioner, the respondent and the time-keeper. The questioner picks up one of the ten question cards in turn and reads the question aloud to the respondent twice. The respondent has ten seconds to think and formulate the answer and 45 seconds to speak whatever comes to her/his mind. The time-keeper prompts the respondent by saying "Start!" ten seconds after the question is read for the second time and says "Stop!" 45 seconds later. Then, the three students change their respective roles and go on to the next question.

For digitally recording the interactions, we built a portable audio recording device consisting of one 24-track hard disk recorder, Alesis ADAT HD24 XR, and two 8-channel microphone faders, Alesis MultiMix 12R, with 12 sets of microphone cables and electret-condenser microphones, Sony ECM-360 and started using this in 2005. In addition, since fall of 2006, each time-keeper uses a video camera with a 30GB internal hard-drive, Sony DCR-SR100, together with a wireless Bluetooth microphone, SONY HCM-HW1. In our earlier papers, we described our equipment, procedure and environment for data collection and transcription in more details. (Harada et al., 2008; Huang, C. R. et al., 2010)

3 Phrase-final Vowel Lengthening

The data we collected show a number of interesting interactional phenomena among Japanese EFL learners. Phrase-final Vowel Lengthening is one case. In examples (1) and (2) below, stressed and/or inserted vowels are transcribed with curly brackets and vowel lengthening is marked by colons (:). Underlines mark words with PfVL.

(1)　There is{u}:: mountain and{o}:: sea.

(2)　… but I{i}: think{u}:: it is more important to have{u}:: fun with friends.

There are some apparently similar phenomena shown by Japanese EFL learners, such as epenthesis, in which the speakers add a vowel after a closed syllable. This is caused partly by the Japanese phonological structure, in which there are basically no closed syllables. Speakers who have learned how to pronounce closed syllables when reading sentences aloud, however, may speak with marked PfVL in their spontaneous speech, which suggests it is caused (at least in part) due to L1 discourse strategy. (Harada et al., 2013)

4 Establishment of Opening Protocols

The students are instructed to say their numbers and names each time before reading the questions aloud twice and responding to the questions. They have the choice of first saying the numbers and then their names or the other way around, and they can do so in English or in Japanese, as in the hypothetical examples in (3) and (4).

(3)　５番、大隈花子です。
　　Go-ban,　　OHKUMA Hanako-desu.
　　five-number Ohkuma　Hanako-copula

(4)　My number is five and my name is Hanako OHKUMA.

At the beginning of the school year, the students are generally not sure how to say their numbers and names but in a few weeks, most start using one or the other formats. Soon, there would be two types of students, those who establish one format and use it consistently and those who use one or the other and follow what the others in the same group for the week do.

5 Emergence of Ending Protocols

Students do not get any explicit instructions as to how to terminate their responses. At the beginning of the school year, most come to the end of the 45 seconds while they are still trying to think of something to say and there are no specific patterns. As the months go on, though, some start using "Thank you." or "That's all." and those expressions may or may not be employed by other students depending on the class. In one particular class we examined, "That's all." gained popularity and propagated among more and more students, as students mixed in different groups each week, as indicated in figure 1 below.
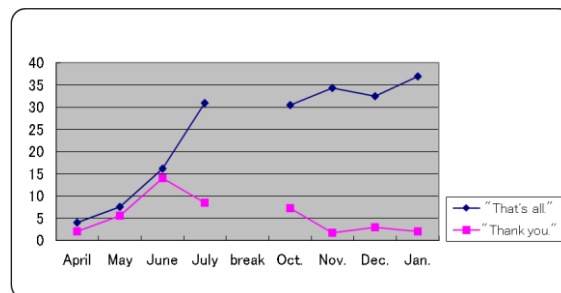

Figure 1 Monthly Total Frequency per Session [April, 2007 through January, 2008]

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