

# Transfer from English to Japanese by Australian JFL learners

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Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL), Australian JFL learners, interference, positive transfer

An analysis of examiners' reports of Australian learners of Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) provides insight into what transfer errors and facilitation is likely to occur in these learners' developing interlanguages.

この論文では日本語を学習するオーストラリア人を対象とした評議会による報告内容を分析し、中間言語において転移がどのような誤用や学習促進をもたらすかを考察する。

**K**IRKPATRICK (1997) regards Japanese as one of the most difficult languages for English speakers to acquire; he supports his argument with data from the American Foreign Services Institute specifying the relative amount of time typically required for English speakers to acquire a given language. Precisely, what are the challenges faced by English-speaking learners of Japanese, and what role does transfer play? An analysis of examiners' reports of Australian learners of Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) provides insight into these issues.

## Literature review

Transfer from English to Japanese can lead to various errors, a phenomenon often referred to as *interference* (or *negative transfer*), including pragmatic, lexical, and collocation errors. Arguably the most serious are pragmatic as these are likely to lead to unintentional offence. Seigal (1996) argues that for long-term foreign residents of Japan, "... the inability to speak pragmatically appropriate Japanese would increase alienation in terms of social contact and economic opportunities" (p. 376). A mastery of the politeness system known as *keigo* is essential for those who wish to conduct business or research in Japan (Tomita, 1999, p. 124; Minegishi-Cook, 2001, p. 95-96). Ishida (2001, p. 2) highlights foreigners' difficulty in differentiating between polite and plain forms.

Toyoda and Ishihara (2003, p. 217-218) describe common errors made by Australian JFL learners, for instance, their use of *konnichiwa* as an equivalent of *hello* being repeated over several meetings in the day. Furthermore, JFL learners convert *Would you like ...?* to *... tai desu ka*, which in some cases could be considered impolite.

However, many students manage to successfully refine their skills. Ishida (2001, p. 10), reports that American JFL students demonstrated increasing self-correction in choosing the right level of formality to suit the context. Ishida argues that explicit instruction is useful in helping learners acquire pragmatic competence. However, the perceived difficulty of the target language is

one of the factors that may dissuade learners from gradually realigning their usage to native norms.

One of the conditions for the acquisition of native-like competence is massive second language exposure (McDonald, 1987, p. 397). The Australian JFL learners in the following study have not benefited from massive exposure to Japanese, but have been limited to typical classroom exposure. Accordingly, transfer characterizes their early L2 acquisition, and as learners gain proficiency, most errors are replaced with target language norms.

### Australian JFL learners and transfer from English

The Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA) is the examining body that oversees university entrance examinations in the state of South Australia. An analysis of examiners' reports of Australian JFL learners (SSABSA, 1993-2005) reveals typical cases of pragmatic, lexical, and collocational transfer from English to Japanese.

#### Pragmatic interference

Due to the hierarchical nature of Japanese social relationships, pragmatic usage in Japanese is typically acquired painstakingly by English speakers.

- Both English and Japanese have ways of shifting register to address interlocutors of different status; one of the ways in which Japanese differs from English is register-specific verbs. For instance, in the case of the verb *to go*, *iku* indicates familiarity whereas *ikimasu* indicates social distance. The inadvertent mixing of polite and plain forms is a typical challenge for Australian learners (e.g., SSABSA, 1995b, 2004, 2005).
- In a dialogue composed by students in which a child addressed her mother, over two-thirds of students inappropriately chose *haha* (SSABSA, 1993). (Japanese children address their mother as *okaasan*, and limit *haha* to when talking about one's mother to others.)
- Another error was the use of *-san* after the student's own name (SSABSA, 1995a). The English equivalent of the use of a title to refer to oneself is rare, but in certain contexts permissible. Fortunately, the reprobation an English speaker would attract on making this error in Japanese would ensure that it did not persist.

#### Lexical interference

In addition to pragmatic transfer errors, many difficulties involve *lexical gridding* (i.e., the range

of word meanings). Difficulties for Australian students include the following:

- *Arimasu* and *imasu* can loosely be translated as *there is/are*, but an additional distinction is necessary in Japanese—*arimasu* refers to inanimate objects and *imasu* to animate objects (SSABSA, 1999).
- Another difficulty is the use of *miru* (*to see*) instead of *au* (*to meet*) (SSABSA, 2002, 2005). In English the verb *to see* carries the additional meaning *to meet* (e.g., *I'll see you tomorrow*). Some students appear to have over-generalized the English verb to the more semantically restricted Japanese verb.
- Confusion of *iku* (*to go*) and *kuru* (*to come*) was commonly evidenced (e.g., SSABSA, 1999, 2002). These verbs do not map neatly onto their English counterparts, and must be used with strict reference to the position of the speaker; *iku* refers to movement from the position of the speaker and *kuru* refers to movement towards the speaker.
- There are two nouns in Japanese that correspond to *thing*: *mono* and *koto*. As the former refers to concrete things and the latter to abstract things, the lack of distinction in English could lead a student to overuse *mono* (see SSABSA, 2002).
- The English adjective *busy* can refer to either a person or a place. However Japanese *isogashii* refers to a busy person and *nigiyaka* to a busy place. There is some evidence of confusion of these adjectives (SSABSA, 2005).
- An invitation in English may be issued using the verb *must*, such as *You must come*. Although the use of the equivalent of *must* in Japanese is not used for invitations, some students used *nakereba narimasen* (SSABSA, 2002).
- Literal translation suggests lexical transfer of presumed English equivalents; examples include *opera no ie* for *Opera House*, *chikatetsu* for *Subway restaurant*, and *haabaa-hashii* for *Harbour Bridge* (see SSABSA, 2005).

#### Collocational interference

Japanese collocations are often different from English collocations, and many generalizations from English are to no effect.

- Errors of collocation included *basu toremashita* for *basu ni norimashita* (SSABSA, 1995b); the former is a direct translation of an English collocation (*took a bus*).
- Another example is *paatii o motsu* for *paatii o suru* (SSABSA, 1999). The former is a direct transla-

tion of the English *have a party*. The Japanese verb *motsu*, (*to have* or *to hold*) is more semantically restricted than its English counterpart, and does not include such English idioms.

- A common mistake was the use of *nikki e* at the beginning of a diary entry (SSABSA, 2005). This was presumably a direct translation of the commonly used *Dear Diary*.

### Positive transfer

While interference errors are fairly obvious, instances of positive transfer can be subtle. Below are some possible examples:

- “Most candidates recorded a high level of achievement against the criterion **cultural appropriateness**. Most entered and left the room with the appropriate expression (しつれいします) and conducted themselves in a formal manner, using both verbal and body language that was respectful of the situation” (SSABSA, 1995a, p. 2).
- Conjunctions such as *kara* and *node* function similarly to English *therefore* and *so* in the way that they link clauses to express cause and effect. Predictably, students used these effectively (SSABSA, 2003).
- Verb endings that map closely with their English counterparts were used successfully. Examples include *V+tai desu* (*want to V*), *V+temo ii desu* (*may V*), *hoshii desu* (*want*) and *V+sumori desu* (*intend to V*) (SSABSA, 2004), *V+to omou* (*I think*), and *V+koto ga dekiru* (*can V*) (SSABSA, 2002).

### Concluding remarks

Transfer characterizes learners who are testing hypotheses on the pathway to acquiring target language norms. Interference is not inevitable and students clearly benefit from instruction on pragmatic and lexical norms; for instance, the learning of Japanese collocations rather than individual words could help students avoid the transfer of English collocations. Awareness of transfer can help English speakers accurately convey their intentions when speaking Japanese, and facilitate smooth interaction with L1 and L2 Japanese speakers.

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