

The Effect of a Study Abroad Program on Request Realizations by Japanese Learners of English

Eton Churchill

This paper examines the acquisition of requests by lower-level Japanese learners of English during an exchange program to the United States. Notebook data (Beebe, 1994) was collected on naturally occurring requests by 47 high school learners of English prior to and following a one-month study abroad program. The findings revealed a decreased frequency in direct realization strategies and an increased use of conventionally indirect strategies and grounders following the exchange. A closer look at learner production showed that this trend could be partially attributed to a learner tendency to combine *want to* statements with other conventionally indirect strategies. Given that the use of *want to* statements may be a feature of linguistic transfer from Japanese, it is suggested that teachers use contrastive analysis to help raise learner awareness of their use of this strategy. It is also suggested that learners be made aware of how use of this strategy in isolation may be perceived as inappropriately direct by native speakers of English.

Introduction

The acquisition of English request realizations by Japanese learners continues to be an area of great interest in the field of second language acquisition for important reasons. As language learners come into contact with native speaking teachers and prepare to interact with English speakers abroad, one of the first speech acts they produce is a request. They may need to request information,

solicit help, or simply ask for something. As they attempt to realize their initial requests, they are confronted with a host of culturally dependent variables such as perceptions regarding social distance, and appropriate levels of politeness and directness. Even as they struggle to reach an understanding of culturally specific norms, learners find themselves restricted by features of their interlanguage and the cultural norms that they bring with them. As a result, many of their initial requests are perceived to be inappropriate by native speaking interlocutors, and this perception, in turn, influences subsequent interaction and language learning opportunities. For this reason, researchers have been motivated to examine how requests are formulated by language learners to better understand how developmental features and transfer affect this area of interlanguage pragmatics.

It is in this tradition of research that the current study is designed. Drawing on the literature on request realizations by Japanese learners of English, this study uses notebook data on the request realizations of Japanese high school students to ask how a short-term exchange affects the interlanguage pragmatics of these learners.

Previous Research

Research on requests by Japanese learners of English has largely followed the agenda on cross-cultural pragmatics (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990; Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Ellis, 1992). Primarily using role-plays and discourse completion tasks (DCTs), researchers have mainly undertaken cross-sectional studies to look at the pragmatic production and judgment of tertiary level subjects (although see Kite, 1999) to investigate developmental issues (Hill, 1997; Takahashi & Dufon, 1989), learner sensitivity to situational factors (Fukushima, 1990; Hill, 1997; Kawamura & Sato, 1996; Tanaka, 1988), and method effects (Rose, 1994; Rose & Ono, 1995; Sasaki, 1998). Where the role-plays have been used, the number of subjects has

been small (4 to 12), whereas the DCT has allowed researchers to canvass up to 80 subjects. In almost all cases, the data collected through quasi-experimental means has been analyzed using the CCSARP coding scheme (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). With a simplified version of the rubric, requests have been categorized as being realized through direct strategies such as "I want this", conventionally indirect strategies as in "Could I borrow your coat?" and hints, or nonconventionally indirect strategies, such as "Gee, it's cold in here."

Although the findings are difficult to compare because of the possibility of method effect (Rose & Ono, 1995; Sasaki, 1998), a few generalizations may be made. On the whole, there appears to be a preponderance of direct requests at the lower levels with a move towards more conventionally indirect strategies as proficiency increases (Hill, 1997; Takahashi & Dufon, 1989). Overall, the findings also report a low frequency of conventionally indirect strategies and hints when compared to the production of native speakers (cf. Hill, 1997; Tanaka, 1988). However, Sasaki (1998) did find some strong hints in her role-play data. The lack of variation at the lower proficiency levels and the observation of complex dynamics at higher levels have led some researchers to suggest that transfer does not play a role until after learners attain the linguistic competence needed to realize strategies borrowed from the L1 (Hill, 1997).

While many of the studies mentioned above have taken care to compare the production of learners at different levels of proficiency, because of their cross-sectional nature they do not describe how the request realizations of a given group of learners change over time (although see Kite, 1999). Furthermore, the studies cited above do not investigate how a given intervention, such as instruction or time spent abroad, affects learner production. Finally, while the quasi-experimental studies have allowed researches to describe how learners realize requests in certain conditions, the studies still leave

unanswered the question of how learners actually make requests in natural settings. This has led some researchers to call for studies involving natural data (Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Rose & Ono, 1995) while others have firmly claimed that “. . . ethnographic field work is the only reliable method of collecting data about the way speech acts function in interaction” (Wolfson, 1983, p. 87).

Given the lack of naturalistic data collected longitudinally, an 18-month study was conducted on the request realizations of Japanese high school learners of English (Churchill, 2000). Towards the end of this larger study, the learners spent one month studying and traveling in the United States and data was collected on their request realizations both prior to and following their time abroad. By comparing learner production at two time intervals interrupted by the study abroad program, this paper intends to address the following question:

What is the effect of a one-month study abroad program to the United States on the naturally occurring requests of Japanese high school learners of English?

Participants

The participants in this study were 47 Japanese high school students (43 females and 4 males) and ten native speakers of English (6 males and 4 females) in an intensive language program in the Kansai region of Japan. Judging from previous data collected on the program, the students had an average Institutional Testing Program TOEFL score of 390 at the time of the study. There were also rated as high-beginners to low-intermediate speakers on an ACTFL oral proficiency interview.

Data Collection

The data were collected over a four-month period in the fall of the students' second year (junior year). The data were collected by

means of spontaneous hand-recorded recall data (Beebe, 1994), otherwise known as notebook data. As learners interacted with native speakers in the school staff room, in classrooms and in other areas in the school, their requests to native speakers were written down in a notebook. The data reported in this study were collected during two six-week periods separated by an interval during which the learners spent one month in a homestay context and attended classes with native speakers in a host institution in the United States. With 69 interactions from the first period and 45 interactions from the period following the exchange, a total of 114 requests were recorded.

The hand-recorded interactions were transcribed and then rated independently by two native speakers of English. Consistent with several studies on request realizations by Japanese learners, the data were analyzed using a conflated version of the CCSARP coding scheme (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). Three levels of requests were defined: direct realizations, conventional indirect requests and non-conventionally indirect statements, or hints. In addition, the direct realizations were broken down into *want* and *mood derivable* statements (e.g., "Would you help me?"). The data were also examined for the presence of grounders - phrases leading into the request such as "*I can't seem to find my pen, could I borrow yours?*", politeness markers ("please") and alerters ("*Mr. Jones, can you help me?*"). Interrater reliability reached a satisfactory level ($r=.92$) and tokens that were not rated consistently were discarded. In addition to the coding of the data using the conflated CCSARP categories, the data was further examined for discourse patterns that might reveal instances of transfer or suggest developmental sequences.

Findings

The results of the CCSARP coding are presented in Table 1. Prior to the study abroad program, the learners used direct and conventionally indirect strategies with comparable frequency. While

41.4% of their realizations during this period were direct requests, 43.1% of their requests were made using conventionally indirect strategies. Hints, or nonconventionally indirect strategies, accounted for only 15.5% of their requests in this period. It is interesting to note that nearly 40% of the direct requests, or 17.2% of all requests, were realized through the use of the verb *to want*. Examples of *want to* statements found in the data are “I want to use computer” and “I want to know school’s e-mail address”. In contrast to the *want to* statements, a larger portion of the direct requests were mood derivable (24.1% of all requests). The significance of making this distinction in the direct request realizations becomes more apparent when this data is compared with that from the period following the exchange.

Following the sojourn abroad, there appears to be an increased frequency in the use of conventionally indirect strategies with a corresponding decrease in direct request realizations. During this data collection period, 54.5% of the requests were made using conventionally indirect strategies, while direct realizations were only made 30.3% of the time. This decrease in the use of direct realizations can be attributed almost entirely to the drop in the use of

Table 1

Frequency and percentage of request strategies prior to and following the exchange

Collection Period	Direct		Conventionally Indirect	Nonconventionally Indirect	Grounders
	Want Statements	Mood Derivable			
Prior to the one-month exchange	10 (17.2%)	14 (24.1%)	25 (43.1%)	9 (15.5%)	6 (10.3%)
Following the one-month exchange	3 (9.1%)	7 (21.2%)	18 (54.5%)	5 (15.1%)	8 (24.2%)

the verb *to want*. Prior to the exchange, the learners made requests using this verb 17.2% of the time while they were only recorded using this strategy in three instances (9.1%) following the exchange. In contrast, the frequency with which mood derivable strategies were used remained comparatively unchanged. In other words, the reduced use of the verb *to want* accounts for the overall decrease in the use of direct requests. The other area where there appears to be development is in the use of grounders, the statements used to introduce the request. While grounders were used with only 10.3% of the requests prior to the exchange, their frequency increased to 24.2% following the exchange. The frequency of nonconventionally indirect requests remained unchanged at 15.1%. Alerters and politeness markers were found in approximately 40% of the learner request realizations both prior to and following the exchange.

Discussion

Overall, the findings outlined above are supported by those of previous research. Namely, in this study, the learners appear to be using more conventionally indirect strategies following the short-term exchange, a finding that is consistent with that of Hill (1997) and Kawamura and Sato (1996) who reported that learners use more conventionally indirect strategies as proficiency develops. This study also supports the claim that intermediate Japanese learners of English do not show an increase in the range of strategies used over time (Fukushima, 1990; Kawamura & Sato, 1996; Tanaka, 1988). While the distribution of the request strategies is different following the exchange, there are no new forms found in the data.

The appearance of *want to* statements in this study is consistent with the findings reported by Iyanaga, Sakikawa and Matusmura (2000). In their study using role play data, the frequency of *want to* statements by their subjects led them to hypothesize that this strategy was due to transfer. Iyanaga et al. explain that *want to* statements such as “I want you to correct this letter”, which are considered

direct in English, may actually be transferred from the indirect strategy in Japanese. In Japanese, the same request could be realized with “*kono tegami o kouseishite itadakitai n desu ga...*”. With this L1 realization, the requester uses the final particle *ga* to indicate that they are intentionally omitting the explicit request, thus mitigating the imposition. In this way, if the *want to* statements are indeed a result of transfer, then the learners in this study may have been attempting to make a conventionally indirect request while the raters used the grammatical form of the request to categorize their realization as a direct realization in English.

The one finding in this study that deserves further consideration is the decrease in direct realizations made with the *want to* form following the exchange. The frequency of this direct realization strategy appears to drop significantly from 17.2% prior to the exchange to 9.1% following the exchange. However, upon a closer examination of the data, it becomes apparent that the decreased frequency in the use of direct requests realized with the *want to* structure may not be attributed uniquely to the learners replacing this form with some alternative. Indeed, the *want to* form is found in data from the period following the exchange, but it occurs in a position that is normally categorized as a grounder in the CCSARP coding scheme.

To illustrate this point, a few examples may be helpful. In Example 1, recorded prior to the exchange, the learner is attempting to get her teacher to let her use a writing essay that she has submitted. She wants to use this material to prepare for her speaking exam which has been integrated with her written work.

Example 1

Learner 1: On speaking exam, I want to say same thing as my writing essay, so I want . . . *so daroo*.

By starting to repeat “I want” and closing with *so daroo*, the learner

seems to feel that this constitutes an appropriate request realization. If this is indeed an example of transfer of an indirect strategy as Iyanaga, Sakikawa and Matusmura (2000) suggest, then the request would be appropriate from the learner's perspective. However, the form of the request led the raters to concur that it was a direct realization. In contrast, Example 2, recorded following the exchange, illustrates a learner using the *want to* structure as a grounder for her request that is subsequently realized through a conventionally indirect strategy.

Example 2

Learner 2: Mr. Peters, we want to finish typing. . . so would you please tell me how to close?

While Learner 2 starts her request with the same strategy used by Learner 1, following a slight pause she adds the conventional head act. As a result, Example 2 ended up being coded as a grounder followed by a conventionally direct realization. This same pattern is found in the rather extensive request realization below, also recorded following the exchange.

Example 3

Learner 3: Yesterday, I got a letter from Mariko. . .and she said. . .she said. . .I want to research this university (shows the NS a piece of paper). . . I looked for information, but I could not find. Could you please research this?

Here again, the *want to* statement occurs followed by a pause, an additional grounder and eventually by the conventionally indirect realization. Thus, as illustrated in Examples 2 and 3, the learners continued to use the *want to* form following the exchange. However, since this structure was sometimes combined with a more

conventional strategy, it was perceived as a grounder by the raters. Accordingly, the frequency of grounders and that of conventionally indirect strategies increased as the use of direct request realization with the *want to* structure decreased following the exchange.

While the one-month exchange to the United States can be credited for the change in the learner request realizations, it is important to note that the nature of this study does not permit one to attribute a specific cause in the learner production. During the exchange the learners took content classes with native speaking peers, so there were no opportunities for explicit EFL instruction on requests. While the effect of classroom instruction may be ruled out, the nature of this study does not make it possible to claim whether the change in learner production was due to increased fluency, due to the input they received in the homestay family, or, most probably, some combination of factors. Nevertheless, the data presented here illustrates that learner request realizations do evolve as a result of a one-month exchange and much of the change in learner production involves the ways in which they use *want to* statements.

Conclusion

This study has drawn on hand-recorded data of request realizations by Japanese high school learners of English prior to and following a short-term exchange to the United States. When compared with request realization prior to the exchange, the learner production following the exchange suggested an increase in the frequency of grounders and conventionally indirect strategies and a corresponding decrease in direct realizations as a result of the exchange, thus confirming findings in previous studies on the development of request realizations by Japanese learners of English. In this study, many of the changes in learner production can be attributed to a change in the use of *want to* statements, a linguistic feature that appears to be transferred from an L1 request realization strategy. Specifically, prior to the exchange the learners realized

many of their requests with this direct strategy, while following the one-month homestay experience, they combined the *want to* structure with conventionally indirect forms.

This study was conducted through the use of hand-recorded data observed in natural contexts. The main limitations to this method are that the data were not audio recorded and that there was no attempt made to experimentally control the type of requests. Having audio-recorded data would greatly improve the potential for the analysis of learner discourse. Furthermore, by experimentally controlling for request type and interlocutor as with a role-play, the results could be perceived as being more valid. However, the use of naturally occurring requests greatly increases the environmental validity of the study as it allows one to investigate how learners are actually realizing requests in real situations.

Inasmuch as this study suggests how request realizations by low proficiency Japanese learners of English may develop, there are some implications for instruction. Learner use of *want to* statements, a feature that appears to be transferred from their L1, could be addressed through the use of contrastive analysis in the classroom. Learner attention should be drawn to the fact that this structure is being transferred from the L1. Furthermore, learners should be made aware that their intention to make an indirect request with this form will actually be perceived as a direct request by native speakers of English. Finally, by illustrating how this form can be combined with a conventionally direct strategy to create a more native-like request, instructors may be able to accelerate the acquisition of appropriate request strategies.

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