

## A STUDY OF ENGLISH RETENTION BY JAPANESE COLLEGE STUDENTS OVER SUMMER VACATION

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Remarkable research efforts have been made to the studies of second language acquisition. Consequently, we know fairly well about how people acquire languages. Based on the obtained data and findings, enormous amounts of time, energy, and also funding have been invested to develop second language learning in terms of curriculum, teaching materials, methodology and so on.

At present, with the analogy of first language acquisition, we tend to regard the process of second language learning solely as the cumulative one. Considering that language learning is a process of going back and forth, we should see what is lost as well as what is acquired. However, very little attention seems to have been paid to the maintenance of second language skills once attained and also the probable process of retention and forgetting of the functional command of second language skills once they are no longer used or when no language instruction is given.

The study of the language skill attrition, in other words, loss of proficiency in one or more skills in one's native or second language, is relatively new in the field of applied linguistics and began to gain greater attention quite recently. Very little systematic research has been done yet: the period of time for each skill to begin to decline, the order of loss in specific linguistic features, and also the avoiding loss or restoring the lost skills.

The present paper concerns with the retention of English by Japanese college students over summer vacation. As Smythe *et al.* (1973: 400) mention, "at the beginning of each school term the foreign language teacher, like all teachers whose subject matter is of cumulative characters, is faced with the possibility that students may have forgotten part of what they have learned in previous courses." The idea of this sort is generally accepted but little research evidence seems to assure if all features of foreign language skills are lost at the same rate or which sets of knowledge and skills are more likely to be retained or lost after instruction. The research findings concerned with these areas would be able to suggest a great deal about how to teach after summer vacation.

In this paper, my discussion will be organized: (1) a brief review of language attrition studies over summer vacation, (2) a small research on forgetting and retaining of some knowledge and skills (listening comprehension, structure, vocabulary, and reading comprehension) involving college level population, and (3) a consideration of the relevance of language attrition research for various aspects of teaching and learning English.

### 2. A REVIEW OF LANGUAGE ATTRITION RESEARCHES OVER SUMMER VACATION

Several researches have been conducted in the area of second language attrition over summer vacation. Here I will quote two researches on the topic.

First, Smythe *et al.* (1973) conducted a couple of studies on second language retention over (1) summer vacation (3 months) and (2) summer vacation plus one semester (5 months) during which no second language instruction was given. The performance levels of 220 students in the first study were of

various range and they were tested for the amount of loss in French skills in listening and reading comprehension. As a result, the authors found a slight but significant loss in reading comprehension and a slight but significant gain in listening comprehension after the summer. In their second study, subjects were 150 students, enrolled in French course in grades nine through eleven and were tested all four skills. The major concern of the second study was to compare language attrition of students continuing the study of French after summer with that of the other group whose resumed the study after 8 months interval. Consequently, the students retested after three months recess showed improved performance whereas those tested after summer plus five months with no instruction showed poorer performance. These two research results led the authors to suggest as follows:

The slight improvement in test performance . . . suggests that the intervening summer months (where no formal educational experience is taking place) does not have an interfering effect on retention. In fact, it is possible that the summer rest might have a facilitating effect!

(Smythe *et al.* 1973: 404)

Another investigation on the effect of summer recess in second language retention was done by Cohen (1974). He summarized patterns of foreign language retention, specifically Spanish-speaking ability, among 14 young children (aged 5-6) participating in a Spanish program. After they have been away from language contact during the summer recess, he attempted to measure differences in the use of particular linguistic features and different types of communicative strategies employed, such as gender agreement, pronoun-noun concord, prepositional phrases, utterance length and so on. After the summer recess, the overall error rate increased from 20% to 24% and also average length of sentences fell from 5.2 words to 3.7 words. Furthermore, prepositions were used slightly less while verbs were used more. Therefore, in case of the speaking ability, we can clearly see the loss of skill because of the disuse during the summer vacation.

These two researches, as well as other studies, seem to provide the conflicting results in regard to whether the summer vacation facilitate or harm language retention. To sum up, there research findings suggest that the rate of loss varies from skill to skill, in other words, the rate of attrition is relatively lower in receptive skills than in productive skills.

### 3. ENGLISH LANGUAGE RETENTION OF JAPANESE STUDENTS OVER SUMMER VACATION

The present study was motivated by the former two studies. Most of English teachers worry about the possibility that at the beginning of each new school term, they have to start all over again because they think that students have forgotten all they have learned before summer. In order to go a little beyond the subjective impression, we need some further research data. A small test was planned in the following manner:

- (1) Subjects: College students were chosen for this study because they are given no instruction and have less exposure, spoken or written, during the summer vacation than most junior or senior high school students in Japan. The sample consisted of 45 sophomore students in Hiroshima University. They were pretested on July 6th, the final day of instruction before the summer recess and posttested immediately after summer, with no language instruction for 10 weeks.<sup>1)</sup>
- (2) Test items: The test items were taken from a locally made trial TOEFL and divided into 4 parts, listening comprehension, structure and written expression, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Only the vocabulary section was taken from *CELT* because the test items in the trial TOEFL seemed too difficult. Section 4, reading comprehension, contains 2 paragraphs, about 20 lines long, each of which has

five multiple choice tests to check the comprehension. The sample of each section is given below. 2)

Directions: You are to choose one which is closest in meaning to the statement you heard in Section 1, and one word or phrase that best completes the sentence in section 2 and 3.

Test items:

Section 1: Listening Comprehension (20)

Q. We should stay home tonight. The concert started at 7: 00 o'clock and we're already half an hour late.

(A) It is 7: 30. (B) It is 7: 00 o'clock. (C) It is 6: 30. (D) It is 8: 00 o'clock.

Section 2: Structure and Written Expression (15)

Q. I am not used \_\_\_\_\_ in such a rude way.

(A) to being talked to (B) being talked to (C) to be talked to (D) be talked to

Section 3: Vocabulary (20)

Q. Only one little boy \_\_\_\_\_ the accident; everyone else was killed.

(A) absorbed (B) survived (C) consumed (D) reckoned

Section 4: Reading Comprehension (10)

(Omitted for a shortage of space)

( ) indicates the number of test items in each section.

(3) Results and discussion: The major finding of the test was, as shown in Table 1, that most of the students showed improved performance after the summer break with significant gain in listening comprehension and vocabulary while significant results were not obtained in other skills. Therefore, as far as these two skills are concerned, the present study seems to support the statement by Smythe *et al.* (1973) that the summer break might have a facilitating effect on language retention.

Table 1 Results of Test 1 and Test 2

Test	Test session				t
	Test 1		Test 2		
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	
Listening	6.85	2.53	8.43	2.44	-4.05**
Structure	6.22	2.12	6.30	1.76	-0.24
Vocabulary	8.89	2.58	9.65	2.74	-2.17*
Reading C.	5.98	2.05	6.15	1.84	-0.59

\* =  $p < .05$   
\*\* =  $p < .01$

However, reaching a statistical significance, the result of the study needs further consideration. For example, the style of testing, objective and multiple choice, could have made it easier for the students to guess and also the practice that they had at the pretest might have a significant effect on the second score. We cannot deny that the students learned some words in the pretest. Or we can say that the proficiency of most college students is already fossilized and the break only two months long does not make much difference in retention, especially in receptive skills. If so, the worry that most teachers of English have might not always be well grounded.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The present research is only the beginning of language loss research. We should make a further attempt such as the collection of more fresh data in a longitudinal way, if possible, with much longer time interval, or the analysis of the relationship between the types of instruction they received and the rate of retention or loss, or attitudes and motivation toward second language learning and so on. As an ultimate goal of language loss research Oxford (1982: 167) remarks;

Language loss research may ultimately tell foreign language teachers about the long-term effects on their teaching — specifically, what types of individuals lose what kinds of L2 skills in what length of time and under what conditions.

The present study as well as some other studies have primarily focused on the relationship between the rate of retention of each skill and the varying time intervals. In addition, we need to give a thought to the other possible effect of learner's age, sex differences, proficiency level on the foreign language retention. With the sufficient data, we will certainly be able to know more about the gradation of teaching materials and methods of instruction which may help the students retain once acquired skills and also recover lost skills.

#### Notes

(1) The author expresses his acknowledgement with hearty gratitude to Mr. T. Nishida of Department of Integrated Arts and Science in Hiroshima University for allowing me to use his class hours and also kind and helpful suggestions in completing this paper.

(2) The test items were extracted from the following sources:

*The English Journal*. "Practice TOEFL" (1983 Special Issue, Autumn)

D.P. Harris and I.A. Palmer (1970) *A Comprehensive English Language Test for Speakers of English as a Second Language*. McGraw-Hill Book Company.

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