EFL students’ language awareness in an e-mail tandem activity

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E-mail tandem is a reciprocal language learning method, in which two learners of a different native language (L1) have e-mail communication in the target language (L2, the partner’s L1), and assist each other’s L2 learning by giving and receiving feedback. Appel (1999) suggested that correction of the partner’s errors enhances the development of learners’ metalinguistic awareness (MA) of L1, which is thought to facilitate L2 learning. Therefore, this study attempted to investigate 1) what L1 features do Japanese tandem learners notice in the partner’s language use, and analyze to explain linguistic rules to the partner, 2) how does their L1 MA affect L2 knowledge, and 3) whether L1 MA correlates L2 ability. The results showed that tandem learners of this study were aware of “linguistic” aspects of L1, and their L1 MA seemed to affect L2 knowledge by contrasting the two languages, trying to find similarities or differences of the linguistic system between L1 and L2. Also, learners with a high level of L1 MA appeared to possess high L2 proficiency. The study concludes by enumerating e-mail tandem’s advantages in MA development.

1. Introduction

1.1 E-mail tandem language learning

E-mail tandem is a reciprocal language learning method, in which two learners of a different native language (L1) communicate by e-mail, using the target language (L2, the partner’s L1). The primary purpose of this method is to improve L2 communicative/linguistic ability. Each partner is required to judge the correctness of the partner’s language and provide linguistic feedback with each other. Among the past studies that suggested advantages of this method, Appel (1999) reported that her students raised their metalinguistic awareness of L1 when they corrected their partner’s language in order to provide feedback.

1.2 Metalinguistic awareness

According to van Lier (1995), metalinguistic awareness (MA) is a person’s ability to objectify language. More specifically, it is a person’s sensitivity or conscious awareness of certain linguistic patterns, such as parts of speech, word order, and so on. Traditionally, MA has been operationalized as a learner’s ability to correct, describe and explain errors of the language (Renou, 2000).

The significance of MA in language learning has been discussed in many studies, and it is now considered that MA has an influence on learners’ L1 proficiency as well as L2 development. Some researchers suggested that L1 MA promotes L2 learning (Cummins, 2000; Lasagabaster, 2001). Otsu (2008) found that there was a positive correlation between Japanese students’ L1 MA and their L2 (English) proficiency.

Keeping these past findings in mind, this study attempted to investigate more about Japanese tandem learners’ MA with the following questions:

1) What L1 features do Japanese tandem learners notice in the partner’s language use, and analyze to explain linguistic rules to the partner?
2) How does their L1 MA affect L2 (English) knowledge?
3) Do Japanese learners with a high level of L1 MA possess higher English proficiency?

2. Method

This study was conducted in the 2006 and 2007 e-mail tandem projects implemented between Japanese and American secondary school students.

2.1 Participants

On the Japanese side, 10 and 7 students participated in each year. They were all 9th grade male students (L1 Japanese, L2 English). The results of an English proficiency test showed that their English ability was quite high for their age. On the American side, 35 and 27 students participated.
They were 9th to 11th grade male and female students (L1 English, L2 Japanese, inter-mediate low).

Since American students outnumbered Japanese students in both years, the authors assigned 3-4 American students to one Japanese student, and had them to correspond with each of the American partners.

2.2 Procedures
The students were told to discuss each other’s culture such as school lives and holidays. Their e-mails consisted of 4 parts: 1) small talk, 2) linguistic feedback, 3) answers to partners’ question, and 4) questions to partner. They were instructed to use L2 in the 1st and 4th parts, and L1 in the 2nd and 3rd parts, considering the level of their cognitive and linguistic development. The students made 6.2 and 5.7 exchanges on average during the 8-week period.

2.3 Data analysis
Three kinds of data were collected from Japanese students and analyzed in this study: Post-project questionnaire, oral interview, and e-mail logs. The questionnaire required them to write a) any linguistic features of the partners’ Japanese use which they noticed and analyzed in the feedback phase, and b) any thoughts they obtained from their L1 analysis that they could apply to their English learning. After this, the authors had oral interviews with each student in order to collect more detailed information about their comments. All of these comments were backed up by the analysis of their e-mail logs.

3. Results & Discussion
The results of the questionnaire and interview sessions showed that not every student reported MA comments. There were, however, episodes of seven students which clearly showed their L1 MA (i.e., correcting, describing, and explaining L1 errors) and its application to English knowledge.

3.1 Students’ MA comments
Student A noticed that his female partner always placed causal adverbial clauses after the main clause. He pointed out her L1 transfer and explained to her that, in Japanese, causal clauses usually come sentence-initially. He then contrasted positional differences of causal clauses between English and Japanese, and realized that, in English writing, he himself had placed causal clauses sentence-initially because of his L1 transfer.

Student B was aware of his female partner’s continuous errors in using Japanese particles “/ə(wa)” and “/ə(– ga).” After long consideration, he finally explained to her that “/ə(– ga)” is attached to new information and “/ə(wa)” is used for old one. He then connected this L1 explicit knowledge to the English articles “a” and “the,” each of which marks first and subsequent mention, respectively.

Student C described his male partner’s misuse of postpositional particles. He explained that Japanese postpositional particles mark subject and objects of various kinds, and advised him to use them correctly. Then, he noticed that English, which has no particle system, relies on word order instead, in order to signal grammatical relations within a sentence.

Students D and E thought that their partners’ Japanese was understandable but sounded unnatural. They both explained that it was because the partners’ verb choice was inappropriate. They then recalled some English phrasal verbs (e.g., make an effort), and inferred that every language may have such conventional patterns of word combination (i.e., collocation).

Student F noticed that his female partner overused “/ə(-no)” to every adnominal. While he pointed out her overuse of a basic rule, he realized that he had also made similar types of errors (e.g., longly). He concluded that L2 learners should be careful to avoid overgeneralization.

Student G found that his partner spelled “μ” in place of “n,” and explained that, in Japanese, all the nasal sounds are spelled with “n.” Later, he discovered that nasal sounds before “p” and “b” are produced with two lips closed, which made him notice that English orthography distinguishes the two types of nasal sounds, that is, “n” and “m.”

3.2 Analysis
In response to the first research question, the L1 linguistic features that each student analyzed were categorized into the knowledge of Grammatical Competence (i.e., syntax, morphology, vocabulary, phonology and graphology), which is one of the components of Bachman’s (1990) Language Competence. According to this, tandem learners of this study focused on “linguistic” aspects of language, rather than “pragmatic” ones.

An intriguing cognitive process was found in analyzing the second research question. The students developed L1 explicit knowledge by analyzing specific L1 features appeared in their partner’s e-mail, and provided linguistic explanations. Then, they contrasted L1 and L2, looking for similarities or differences of the
linguistic systems between the two languages. Some researchers insisted that this cognitive effort, that is, contrasts between L1 and L2, enhances the development of MA and L2 proficiency. For example, Little (2003) acknowledged that tandem learners could benefit from contrasts between L1 and L2. Jessner (1999) stated that MA can be enhanced by perceiving similarities or differences between L1 and L2, which can activate prior linguistic knowledge and guide them in the development of L2 system. According to these arguments, learner’s contrasts between the two languages might be the key for e-mail tandem to be successful in terms of MA development.

In order to answer the third research question, the authors plotted out all the students’ scores of the English proficiency test, and identified the scores of Students A-G, who reported their MA comments (Fig. 1). The figure shows that there seems to be an overall tendency between students’ MA and English proficiency. In other words, Japanese learners with a high level of MA are likely to be successful in English learning.

4. Conclusion

The fact that not every student reported MA comments seems to suggest that it was too demanding for junior high school students to make such a linguistic analysis by themselves. On the other hand, another finding of the study was that those who reported MA comments were successful English learners. This result supports the past studies, that is, L1 MA and L2 proficiency positively correlate with each other.

It is not certain, however, if high L2 proficiency enhances MA, or if high MA promotes L2. This needs further investigation.

If MA is proved to precede L2, then MA raising activities should be employed in language education, and e-mail tandem could be utilized for this purpose because it has a feedback phase which triggers students’ noticing and analyzing L1 features that appeared in the partner’s e-mail. Also, their noticing is promoted by the written nature of the e-mail discourse. Moreover, its asynchronous mode of communication allows them more time to analyze the language. It is expected that these advantages will lead students to contrast linguistic systems between L1 and L2, and examine similarities and differences between the two languages.

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References


