

Pragmatic Transfer in Listening

Analyzing JFL Learners' Backchannels and Head Nods During Narrative Story Telling

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Backchannel, a short verbal response produced by the listener (e.g. *uh hunh* in English), and head nods are ways of showing participation in conversations as a listener. Backchannel use by learners of Japanese has been of interest to researchers, but there is no consensus as to how similar or different learners behave while listening in Japanese. For example, some studies have reported that learners of Japanese use less backchannels than native speakers do (Watanabe, 1994), but others have reported that there is no significant difference in terms of frequency (Mukai, 1999).

The use of backchannel is context-dependent and it is considered to be influenced by factors such as age, gender, relationship of the conversation participants, and the topic of the conversations. Learners' L1 may be an influential factor, but research participants with different profiles in the previous research prevent us from examining how a particular L1 influences the acquisition of native-like listening behavior by learners of Japanese.

In this study, listening behaviors by four learners of Japanese in their L1 (English) and L2 (Japanese) were investigated. The research questions were as follows:

1. Do learners of Japanese show similar or different patterns in using backchannel responses and head nods in terms of frequency while listening to a narrative story in their L1 (English) and L2 (Japanese)?

2. Do learners of Japanese show similar or different patterns in using backchannel responses and head nods in terms of location while listening to a narrative story in their L1 (English) and L2 (Japanese)?

The data consisted of three types of video-recorded narrative story telling dyads: NS–NS (Japanese), NS–NNS (Japanese), and NS–NS (English). Native speakers of the two languages participated in the study as a baseline. During the data collection, the person who was designated as a speaker told the same story separately to six people who were assigned the role of listener. After the story was told, each listener was asked to complete a picture-ordering task.

The use of backchannel and head nods was analyzed in terms of the frequency and location. Frequency was analyzed based on the number of occurrences per minute, and the location was examined based on Clancy et al.'s (1996) analysis. Clancy et al. used grammatical and intonational completion points to examine where reactive tokens (RTs) occur in different languages. They found that less RTs occur at those completion points in Japanese, indicating that Japanese speakers use RTs in the middle of turns.

The results of this study indicated that the four learners showed similar patterns in using backchannels and head nods in their L1 and L2 in the following aspects. First, learners' frequency patterns for using backchannels were similar between L1 and L2. Those learners who used a higher number of backchannels in their L1 used higher number of backchannels in their L2 as well. Moreover, the ratio of backchannel and head nods was similar between L1 and L2 among the four learners.

The result of the location of backchannel by native speakers was similar to Clancy et al.'s in that native speakers of Japanese used less backchannels at the intonational and grammatical completion points compared to native English speakers. All four learners used backchannels at the intonational and grammatical completion points both in their L1 and L2, which may be a source of non-native like behaviors in their listening.

The results indicate that learners may carry their L1 listening behaviors while they are listening in their L2. Previously, it has been

claimed that learners do not use enough backchannels and it may cause unsatisfactory feelings for native speakers of Japanese (Mizutani, 1982), but it was not the case for the participants in this study. It was turn-internal backchannels that showed different patterns. Pragmatic transfer (Kasper, 1996) seems to exist in listening behaviors and it is necessary to pay more attention to learners' L1 to facilitate the improvement and efficiency of their listening skills.

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