The Linguistic Breakdown Phenomenon in Advanced L2 Chinese Oral Production

Abstract

Second language (L2) Chinese oral skill has received the most attention among the four language skills in both Chinese teaching and learning practice, partially due to its prominent productive characteristics. Nevertheless, due to the complex process and variables involved in the L2 speech production, research on L2 speaking has been limited and research on L2 Chinese speaking is particularly scarce. Research has described L2 speech productions in different perspectives and dimensions. Levelt (1989) and Kormos (2006) describe speaking process as three stages consisting of conceptualization, i.e. meaning generation, formulation, i.e. grammatical and phonological encoding, and articulation. This study explores the linguistic breakdown phenomenon existed in advanced L2 Chinese learners’ speech production. Linguistic breakdown refers to the moments when a learner’s language is “no longer adequate to handle the communicative challenges presented” (ACTFL OPI TTM, 1999). Data are elicited by two types of tasks: monologic and dialogic oral tasks. Two research questions are asked:

1) What types of linguistic breakdown take place in advanced L2 Chinese learners’ monologic and dialogic oral productions? Are there any differences between the two task types in terms of learners’ linguistic breakdown patterns and types?

2) What strategies do advanced L2 Chinese learners employ to repair linguistic breakdown to maintain the speech production, and what is the effectiveness of such strategies?

Fifteen advanced college L2 Chinese learners participate in this study. Each learner completes two sessions of monologic and two sessions of dialogic oral production tasks respectively over the course of two months. For each oral task, learners are provided with a specific discussion topic and a task guideline two days prior to the task implementation day. For each monologic task, learners produce a five-minute oral speech individually. For each dialogic task, learners participate in an oral conversation, in a style similar to the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) with their Chinese language instructor. Students’ oral productions in both monologic and dialogic tasks are audio-recorded.

To answer the first research question, the linguistic breakdown occasions and moments are identified and categorized. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used for data analysis, and data are also compared between the monologic and dialogic oral task types. To answer the second research question, the strategies learners employ to repair linguistic breakdowns are identified and analyzed for salient themes. Five participants are also invited to further elaborate on the repairing strategies they have used during oral productions. The effectiveness of those
strategies is evaluated by two independent Chinese language instructors.

The findings show that linguistic breakdowns occur in the forms of lack of content generation, difficulties in grammatical or lexical item retrieval, lack of discourse blocks, loss of fluency, etc. (Wood, 2010). The patterns of linguistic breakdown also appear to be different between the monologic and dialogic task types. Learners employ a variety of cognitive and metacognitive strategies to repair linguistic breakdowns to maintain their speech flow. Such strategies however have various effects. This research adds knowledge to an understanding of the factors influencing L2 Chinese speech production, especially at the advanced proficiency level. It also helps to uncover a variety of “bottleneck situations” existed in the development of oral skill among advanced Chinese L2 learners. This provides valuable information for L2 Chinese teaching practice.

**References:**


