Lexical Quality and Quality of Compositions: The Case of Chinese Heritage Language (CHL) Learners

This study explores the lexical quality of compositions from school age CHL learners and the lexical factors that affect native speakers’ (NSs) perception of the quality of compositions. To date, studies on second language vocabulary acquisition have emerged after years of neglect as key areas for research (e.g., Laufer, et al., 2004); studies on vocabulary acquisition among college Chinese learners have also been growing (e.g., Shen, 2009). However, literacy acquisition among K-12 CHL learners is still under-examined. This current study presents as a pilot study for a planned longitudinal study that looks into CHL literacy learning and instruction.

Three research questions are investigated. First, does the overall quality of the compositions, as perceived by Chinese NS raters, increase as CHL learners’ grade level increases? Second, does the lexical quality as defined in the study, increase as grade level increases? Third, which measures of lexical quality are related to the quality of compositions?

To answer these questions, 95 essays on a take-home semi-open composition assignment from Grades 3 to 12, collected from a weekend Chinese school, were analyzed according to indexes of lexical quality (e.g., Engber, 1995). The indexes included: lexical richness (lexical variation and lexical density), lexical errors (ratio of lexical errors to the total number of lexical words) and lexical sophistication (ratio of low frequency words to the total number of lexical words). Meanwhile, a group of 10 Chinese NSs rated the essays on a holistic scale modified from a rating scale widely used in ESL writing research (Jacobs et al., 1981). These procedures generated two sets of data, i.e., numerical scores on the lexical quality indexes and numerical ratings on the overall quality of the compositions.

To answer the research questions, ratings from the native speakers were first compared, in order to identify whether the writings from the higher grades were rated higher than those from the lower grades. Subsequently, scores on the lexical quality indexes across the learner groups were analyzed with one-way ANOVA to identify whether lexical quality increased as the grade level. Next, all the lexical quality measures were compared to the holistic rating scores. Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the measures of lexical quality and the scores of the perceived quality of the compositions. To highlight, the results revealed that as grade level increased, the learners produced a set of vocabulary with significantly greater variety and sophistication; but not all the indexes of lexical quality were significantly related to the NSs’ perception of the quality of the compositions.

Results were discussed from the perspective of vocabulary knowledge acquisition and application. Implications for vocabulary instruction in CHL classrooms were also discussed. Additionally, I connected the findings of this study with the larger context of K-12 Chinese heritage language education and discussed their implications for Chinese heritage language education at the collegiate level.

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