The Syntactic Accuracy in Advanced L2 Chinese Oral Productions

Abstract

Accuracy, fluency, and complexity are deemed as three essentials dimensions that shape second language (L2) proficiency (Towell, 2012). Among the three dimensions, L2 accuracy serves as the foundation for the development of L2 fluency and complexity. An investigation of the development of L2 accuracy facilitates an understanding of how the L2 system is developed and may add knowledge to L2 acquisition theory. Nevertheless, most of the current L2 accuracy studies have been conducted in the context of L2 writing and in the context of the English language (e.g., Yuan & Ellis, 2003). Limited accuracy studies can be found in L2 speaking or in L2s other than English. Research on L2 Chinese oral accuracy is particularly scarce.

This study investigates the syntactic accuracy phenomenon in advanced L2 Chinese learners’ speech productions. Syntactic accuracy refers to the correctness of grammatical features at the syntactic level (Polio, 1997), and is regarded as important indices of L2 speaking development. The syntactic features examined in this study include three categories: word order; correlative conjunctions; cohesive devices that link ideas within and among sentences and paragraphs (ACTFL, 2012). Thus, a syntactic error may include an error in word order, the usage of cohesive devices, or the usage of correlative conjunctions. Examples of Chinese syntactic features include the 把 ‘ba’ structure, 比 ‘bi’ structure, conjunctions such as 因为… 所以… ‘yinwei…suoyi…’ structure, and so on. Data in this study are elicited from the advanced L2 Chinese learners’ three monologic oral tasks. Two research questions are asked:

1) What is the level of syntactic accuracy in advanced L2 Chinese learners’ monologic oral productions?
2) What types of syntactic errors do advanced L2 Chinese learners make in their monologic oral productions, and what are the primary error patterns?

Twenty advanced college L2 Chinese learners participate in this study. Each learner completes three monologic oral production tasks over the course of one semester. For each oral production task, learners are provided with a specific discussion topic and a task guideline two days prior to the task implementation day. For each monologic oral task, learners produce a five-minute individual oral speech. Learners’ oral productions are audio-recorded. To answer the first research question, i.e. the level of syntactic accuracy in oral productions, the syntactic accuracy is operationalized by dividing the number of correct syntactic structures divided by total number of syntactic structures used. To answer the second research question, i.e. the types and patterns of syntactic errors in oral productions, the incorrect syntactic usages are identified, categorized into error types, and analyzed for prominent
patterns.

The findings indicate that advanced L2 Chinese learners investigated in this study have established relatively stable syntactic knowledge base, with some learners generating higher syntactic accuracy than others. Nevertheless, the data also show systematic syntactic error patterns, which relate specifically to the usages of cohesive devices and correlative conjunctions. This study adds knowledge to an understanding of the linguistic development in L2 Chinese speech production. It also has implications for grammar instruction and feedback-giving pedagogical practice.

References:


