Study of the Improvement in Learning the Nuance of Japanese Onomatopoeia Through A Word-Creation Task

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Onomatopoetic words play an integral part in Japanese (Perniss, 2010), are used frequently in everyday conversation, and make descriptions more vivid and casual speech more natural. To non-native speakers of the language, however, onomatopoetic words remain some of the most difficult words, being culturally loaded (Ivanova, 2006). Previous learning methodologies for onomatopoeia have mainly concentrated on the meaning of onomatopoeia in a specific sentence, which does not allow non-native speakers to obtain an overview of the nuance of onomatopoeia or to learn it systematically.

This study takes cognizance of the view that language learners who never receive sufficient instruction in the nuance of Japanese onomatopoeia miss an important tool for understanding and memorizing onomatopoeia. Both explicit and implicit nuances exist in Japanese onomatopoeia. Therefore, it is very necessary for non-native speakers to learn both explicit and implicit nuance of onomatopoeia.

The purposes of this study are to develop a method to improve non-native speakers' learning outcomes of the explicit and implicit nuance in Japanese onomatopoeia, and to verify the effectiveness of this method. To achieve the first purpose, we investigate the following two questions:

1. How can explicit nuance of onomatopoeia be learned?
2. How can implicit nuance of onomatopoeia be learned?

Further, to establish the effect of our method, we clarify the following three questions:

1. Will the onomatopoetic word-creation process enable non-native speakers to achieve

better learning outcomes?

2.   Will the explicit word formation rules cause non-native speakers to become more motivated and interested in learning Japanese onomatopoeia?

3.   Will this learning proposal be accepted well by non-native speakers?

It seems to be possible for non-native speakers to learn explicit nuance by learning the word-formation rules of onomatopoeia, as Balteiro (2011) asserts that word-formation mechanisms and rules appear to be important and necessary for non-native speakers, mainly because they would contribute highly to the learners' lexical resource, which tends to be quite limited.

As production of the target language helps L2 learners to notice their linguistic problems in the target language (Swain, 1995), we include a word-creation process in order to allow non-native speakers to raise awareness of the gap between their nuance and native speakers' nuance, which might be a good way to learn implicit nuance of onomatopoeia.

In order to enhance their learning results with regard to the nuance of Japanese onomatopoeia, we designed a feedback process for the words created by non-native speakers, which would give these non-native speakers a good opportunity to correct their nuance (Gass et al., 1998; Muranoi, 2007).

It is envisaged that this study will create a method to improve non-native speakers' learning outcomes with regard to the nuance of Japanese onomatopoeia by showing them the explicit rules of such nuance as summarized by Tamori (2002), and then allowing them to create their own onomatopoetic words based on these rules. Finally, feedback will be given on these words created by non-native speakers, which will contribute an efficient method for them to understand and remember Japanese onomatopoeia. It will also help them to express themselves vividly when communicating with native speakers.

Starting with an investigation into whether creating new onomatopoeia is effective in the promotion of learning outcomes for the nuance of onomatopoeia, we conducted an experiment, involving a word-creation task. A control group was given the task of evaluating the fitness of the words created in this task, on five-points Likert scale. The participants were current university students, who are non-native speakers. In the experiment session, the participants were required to take a pre-test on Japanese onomatopoeia. They were then divided randomly into two groups (group A was given the word-creation task and group B was given word-evaluation task) according to the level of the results of the pre-test. Both groups were then shown the explicit rules of the nuance of Japanese onomatopoeia. According to the instruction of a certain context, group A was required to create 10 new onomatopoetic words based on the rules of existing words, while group B was required to evaluate each word

in the given context, which had already been listed on the screen, on a five-point Likert scale. Both groups were given the same context. After the creation or evaluation task, feedback was immediately given from the database, which consists of Japanese native speakers' evaluation of the fitness of the words used in the experiment, on a five-point Likert scale. After the two groups had completed their tasks, a post-test of onomatopoeia was conducted to measure their performance.

The success of the experiment, therefore, can be measured in terms of how effective it was in achieving the set objective to shift the participants' learning outcomes with regard to the nuance of Japanese onomatopoeia. The pre-test was conducted to check the participants' original level of Japanese onomatopoetic knowledge, while the post-test was conducted to check their performance. The score shift between pre-test and post-test will be analyzed and discussed. In addition, the post-test required having the same quality as the pre-test.

In order to understand the shift in the participants' motivation towards learning Japanese and onomatopoeia, and their attitudes toward the methods used (word-creation task and word-evaluation task), the participants were required to complete a questionnaire after the experiment sessions. The collected data were analyzed by making a quantitative comparison of group A and group B's responses to the questionnaire.

In the experiment, a significant score difference was observed with regard to the learning outcomes between group A and group B. Significant differences between their post-test scores were also observed. This confirms that our proposed method is effective in improving the learning outcomes of the nuance of Japanese onomatopoeia. It also confirms that the word-creation process encourages non-native speakers to perform better in the nuance of Japanese onomatopoeia. There was no significant difference, however, between the two groups' scores with regard to their motivation to learn Japanese and onomatopoeia as well as their attitude towards our proposal, even though both two groups tended to increase their learning motivation through the experiment. This confirms that the effect of the word-creation process may not be sufficient to improve the participants' motivation toward learning Japanese or onomatopoeia. In order to see the trends of the two groups in detail, analysis of the proportion of the positive evaluation of motivation and awareness of each group was conducted t separately.

These results suggest that we may succeed in creating an effective method to improve the learning outcomes of the nuance of Japanese onomatopoeia through a word-creation task, by requiring an active and individual activity to create new onomatopoeic words. Creating new words, however, may be viewed as a bother for learners and fail to improve learning motivation. Further research is needed to ascertain how to improve non-native speakers'

learning motivation towards Japanese and onomatopoeia, as well as their awareness of the application of this proposal.