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学　位　論　文　要　旨

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氏　名　　　米崎　啓和

題　目　A Study on How to Enhance Spoken Word Recognition by Japanese EFL Learners with Lower Levels of Proficiency

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学位論文要旨（和文2,000字又は英文1,000語程度）

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The main purpose of this study is to propose effective methods of enhancing spoken word recognition by Japanese EFL learners with lower levels of proficiency. The study first gives theoretical analyses about the listening process and the spoken word recognition. Following this, several experiments were conducted in order to empirically examine what kind of pedagogical methods would be effective in enhancing spoken word recognition by Japanese EFL learners with lower levels of proficiency.

The theoretical study revealed that the listening process consists of three main phases: perception, parsing, and utilization. In addition, when listeners perceive and parse the incoming speech, they utilize bottom-up and top-down processing across all these three phases. In order for listening comprehension to be successful, therefore, both bottom-up and top-down processing must be fully functional.

On the other hand, spoken word recognition is a basic component in listening comprehension, since, unlike in reading, words are not distinctly segmented with spaces. Listeners, therefore, must find by themselves where word boundaries fall and identify words in the continuous speech. Especially in the case of L2 learners, word recognition is not always automatic, and if not, it may well impair comprehension.

Many Japanese EFL learners, especially those with lower levels of proficiency, find it challenging to recognize words in speech, even when they can recognize and understand the same words in the written script. In addition, they are sometimes unable to segment the speech and recognize a word in it which they have no difficulty identifying when the same word is enunciated in isolation.

This is partly due to the difference in phonological features between English and Japanese. Specifically, English stress-timed rhythm and its closed-syllable structure not only brings about a lot of phonetic changes, but also makes the speech quite disproportionate in length with its written version. This causes trouble for Japanese EFL learners, because Japanese is a mora-timed language and is articulated as it is written.

Studies show that the unit for spoken word recognition in English is a stress unit, which contains one stressed syllable with several weak ones. Here, not an individual word but a chunk of words, which form a stress unit such as formulaic sequences, play an important role. Therefore, in order to correctly recognize elusive weak syllables in English speech, it is important to first catch a chunk of words as a whole before segmenting it into individual words.

However, Japanese EFL learners are not accustomed to English natural rhythm as well as natural speech rate, which is one of the greatest variables in listening. Based on these theoretical background, five experiments were conducted in order to search for effective pedagogical methods which would enhance Japanese EFL learners' spoken word recognition.

The first experiment examined whether recognition of function words, which are mostly made up of unstressed syllables, are more demanding than that of content words. The result indicated that function words are more difficult to recognize than content words with speech rate an important variable.

In the second experiment, it was shown that treatment in which Japanese translations were given before dictation practices and instructions were provided to make inferences about the text had positive effects on spoken word recognition. This might well have resulted from some form of reinforcement on the top-down processing, through application of such strategies as semantic and contextual inferences. In addition, the treatment was no less effective in enhancing the recognition of function words than that of content words.

In the third experiment, it was shown that the treatment of giving learners grammatical and phrasal knowledge had only limited effects on their spoken word recognition. In the case of Japanese EFL learners with lower levels of proficiency, it was only effective on content words for the speech delivered at a moderately slow rate.

In the fourth experiment, learners were provided with treatment in which they listened in class to the material of the textbook at four different compressed speech rates for half a year. The results showed that 1.5 times faster than the normal speech rate had positive effects on their word recognition at the baseline rate. However, effects on recognition of function words were limited.

The fifth experiment focused on the phonological features of English. The treatment involved explicit explanations about English stress-timed rhythm, closed-syllable structure and other phonological features as well as perception and articulation practices using dialogues. In the practice sessions, the participants were asked to stick rigidly to the rhythm and other phonological features proper to English. The results showed that the treatment had been effective for the recognition of both content and function words.

In conclusion, based on these empirical data, the present study gives four major findings concerning the teaching methods to enhance spoken word recognition by Japanese EFL learners with lower levels of proficiency. First, it would be effective for learners to get accustomed to English phonological features and its stress-timed rhythm through articulation as well as perception practices after explicit explanations. Second, constant exposure to a compressed speech rate of about 67 percent the baseline rate would also be effective. Third, it is important to get listeners to pay more attention to meanings and instruct them to make inferences on the information they perceived. Fourth, phrasal and grammatical knowledge must be effectively complemented by the reinforcement from the bottom-up processing, such as the one related to speech rate or to English phonological and prosodic features, in order to help learners better recognize words in the spoken text.

From these findings, the present study suggest that the use of authentic materials, which fully reflect the English stress-timed nature and other phonological features, not be avoided in the English educational environment.