Linguistics for language learning: An approach for learner autonomy

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Abstract. This article details efforts to teach linguistics to sophomores studying at Miyazaki International College (MIC). This course was created for students who were unable to study abroad because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The goal of the course was to target the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, while also fostering autonomous language learning by developing greater language awareness.

Introduction

Linguistics is a multidisciplinary area of study that aims to scientifically understand the nature of language, its uses, and how it is acquired. As a content course, linguistics is a unique area of study for students at MIC, because while it is related to language, acquisition of language is not typically the object of instruction. The goal of the current course, however, was to directly connect theoretical content of the field of linguistics with language instruction to help students to develop metacognitive strategies to better reflect on their own language learning. Cohen (2011) writes that "[m]etacognitive strategies deal with preassessment and preplanning, online planning and monitoring, and postevaluation of language learning activities and of language use events" (p. 19). Course activities were designed to promote reflection on language learning strategies at each of these stages.

The course was divided into six modules that covered areas typical to an undergraduate linguistics course. These included an introduction to linguistics, phonetics/phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, and second language acquisition. For each of these modules I prepared short texts that introduced basic

concepts related to each of these areas of study. Each article was written to include fourth and fifth band New General Service List (NGSL) vocabulary (Browne, Culligan & Phillips, 2013) and ranged from 750 to 850 words in length.

Each module typically began with a critical thinking activity designed to develop interest and awareness in the topic. After this, a reading article was introduced, and time was given for students to read sections of the article on their own and to look up unfamiliar vocabulary. Students then worked in groups to check their understanding of the article with their peers. After confirming comprehension of assigned sections of the article, students then practiced summarizing the main ideas of the article. Discussion questions related to the article were also used to give students opportunities to practice working in groups and to promote critical thinking. Writing was incorporated in the course through open ended journal assignments where students were encouraged to write about things that they had learned in class and to raise additional ideas or questions they had about the content. The following sections present key elements from each module.

Introduction to Linguistics

The goal of the first module was to provide an overview of the course and to get students interested in the material. This was done by illustrating that the field of linguistics has played a role in the development of technology that students use in their day-to-day lives (e.g., computer search technology, machine translation, auto-correct, voice recognition technology). Figure 1 shows one such example from the first reading. The image shows a translation of the Japanese sentence *korona-ga hayatteiru*, which can mean either "Corona is spreading" or "Corona is popular". In this instance, the online translation software has translated this as "Corona is popular". This was included

in the reading to get students to discuss whether this was a good translation and to illustrate the complexities of human language.

About 29,700,000 results (0.53 seconds)

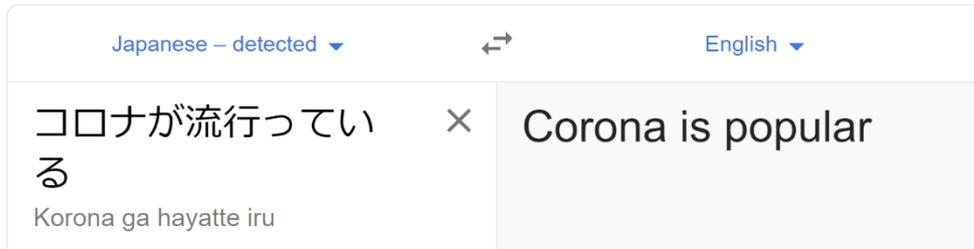| Japanese – detected ▾	⇄	English ▾
コロナが流行っている Korona ga hayatte iru	×	Corona is popular

Figure 1. Limitations of machine translation devices

The project for the introduction to linguistics module was designed to get students to think about language scientifically. For this, students were asked to come up with an explanation for when 何 is pronounced as なん(nan) and when it is pronounced as なに (nani). The use of *nan* and *nani* is determined by two rules. The first is that in cases where 何 targets a quantity, it is pronounced as *nan* (e.g., 何枚, how many sheets, 何才, how old), and in the case of quality, it is pronounced as *nani* (e.g., これは 何). The expressions 何人 and 何色 clearly convey this contrast, as the reading changes depending on whether what is questioned is a quantity (なんにん、なんしょく) or a quality (なにじん、なにいろ). The second rule that interacts with the first relates to the sound that follows 何. When 何 is followed by an alveolar (e.g. [t], [d], [ɾ]) it is pronounced as nan (e.g., 何ですか, 何って、何の). This is clearly demonstrated by the difference between「何」and「何ですか」as both target quality and the minimal difference is whether 何 is followed by an alveolar.

The purpose of this activity was to get students to come up with hypotheses and to test those hypotheses with data. Because this is an extremely common feature of

Japanese grammar, it was easy for students to come up with many examples of sentences where 何 is pronounced as *nani* and *nan*. It was also possible for me to challenge students' hypotheses and to provide them with examples to guide them in the appropriate direction. Through this, it was possible for students to experience the scientific process of making observations, formulating hypotheses, and then revising their hypotheses based on new data.

Each of the subsequent reading articles was designed to present a basic introduction to the major areas of linguistic study and to provide students with similar critical thinking activities. Each module was also connected to practical issues of English language learning, and throughout each module students worked on projects that targeted language study related to that module. The following sections present critical thinking activities and language learning activities that were included in each module.

Phonetics/Phonology

The phonetics/phonology module was designed to introduce basic concepts of phonetics and phonology and to connect research in this area to pronunciation instruction. The following passage from the phonetics/phonology reading (Example 1) describes prosodic features of English pronunciation. One benefit of introducing these terms in the reading article was that in addition to functioning as course content, it also introduced valuable metalanguage for providing pronunciation feedback to students.

1.   Features of English pronunciation

Besides individual sounds, phoneticians and phonologists also research the rhythm, pitch, and intonation patterns of languages. One characteristic of English is stress. Stressed words are louder and longer and said with higher pitch than unstressed words. In English, important, or new information gets stress and unimportant information does not get stress. Usually, function words like articles (a, the), prepositions (in, on, at, to), pronouns (he, she, him, her), and conjunctions (and, or) do not get stress in English.

As noted above, discussion questions in the reading articles were used to promote critical thinking and group work between students. An example of one such question asked students to apply the information from the phonetics/phonology reading article by identifying which sound wave was produced by a NS of English and which was produced by a NS of Japanese (Example 2).
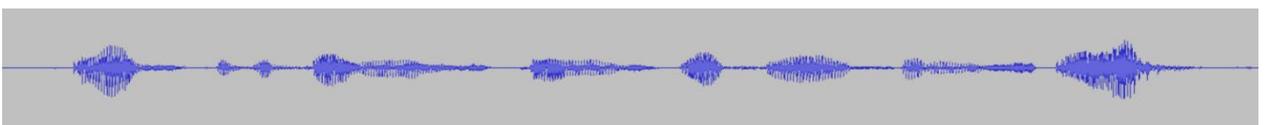
2.   Below are two pictures of sound waves of a native speaker of English and a native speaker of Japanese reading the sentence "Ask her to bring these things from the store". Which was recorded by a native speaker of English and which was recorded by the native speaker of Japanese? Why do you think so?

a)
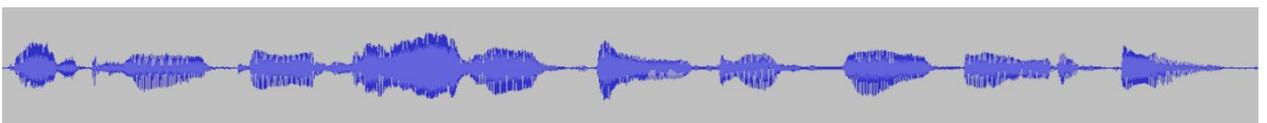
Ask   her   to   bring these   things   with   her   from the store

b)

   Ask   her to bring these   things   with her   from the   store

As the goal of this course was to get students to consider areas where they can improve their own language ability, students were encouraged to reflect on their own language learning needs and goals. Impersonal phrasing was generally used when students were doing group work (e.g., Japanese speakers), so that students did not have to feel as if they were reporting on their own difficulties with English. Care, however, was taken not to frame Japanese learners as deficient at learning English by highlighting that learning a second or foreign language is difficult for anyone. This was done by including complementary examples of difficulties English learners of Japanese commonly face (Example 3).

3.   Discussion question for phonetics/phonology article
What other sounds are difficult for Japanese speakers learning English?
What sounds in Japanese do you think are difficult for native English speakers?

For the final phonetics/phonology projects, students recorded the "Please call Stella" passage (Example 4) from The Speech Accent Archive (Weinberger, 2015).

4.   Please call Stella passage

Please call Stella. Ask her to bring these things with her from the store: Six spoons of fresh snow peas, five thick slabs of blue cheese, and maybe a snack for her brother Bob. We also need a small plastic snake and a big toy frog for the kids. She can scoop these things into three red bags, and we will go meet her Wednesday at the train station.

This passage was chosen because the Speech Accent Archive provides audio files of hundreds of native and nonnative speakers reading this passage. As students primarily study abroad in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States, recordings produced by male and female speakers from each of these countries were made available to students to listen to and to practice imitating.

Instruction targeted prosodic features of speech, as these have been shown to play a greater role in overall intelligibility than segmentals (Derwing & Rossiter, 2003). Specifically, emphasis was placed on connected speech, word stress, and sentential focus. After some practice, students were given a textually enhanced version of the script to visually reinforce the fact that the speech stream is not segmented according to the spaces between words (Example 5). In this example, instances of connected speech are shown orthographically (e.g., ASKər for "ask her"), stressed words are written in capital letters, <ə> (schwa) is used to indicate unstressed syllables, "/" indicates thought groups (groups of words that are spoken together), and bolded words indicate words that receive sentential focus.

5.   Please call Stella (enhanced text)

> PLEASE CALL **STELL**ə/ ASKər tə BRING THESE **THINGS/** WITHər frəm thə **STORE**/ SIX SPOONZə **FRESH** SNOW PEAS/ FIVE THICK SLABZə **BLUE** CHEESE/ n MAYBE'ə SNACK forər BROTHər **BOB**/ WE ALSO NEEDə SMALL PLASTIC **SNAKE**/ nə BIG TOY **FROG/** fər thə **KIDS**/ SHE cən SCOOP THESE THINGS intə THREE RED **BAGS**/ n WE wəll GO MEEDər **WEDNES**DAY/ ət thə **TRAIN** STATION.

Students also practiced annotating prosodic features of speech for different speakers. The purpose of this was to get students to attend to prosodic features of English and to illustrate the areas where English speakers differ and where they show commonalities. Students generally responded favorably to these exercises and several students even commented that they felt that this module helped recreate some of what they would have learned during their study abroad experience. Notably, students reported that they had never received instruction in this area, so although this module

was short overall (approximately six class sessions), it is hoped that these exercises contributed to greater awareness and noticing of prosodic features of English.

Morphology/Syntax

Due to the wide variation in vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, these modules were designed to be more open ended and to reflect the learning needs of the student. In the morphology component of the course, students considered the meaning of prefixes and suffixes in English. Example 6 presents a discussion exercise given to students.

6.   Look at the examples of the prefixes and suffixes of English. Try to think of words with these prefixes and suffixes. What are their meanings?

Prefix	Suffix
Pre-	-er
Un-	-ness
Con-	-ly
Dis-	-ist
Re-	-ment
Anti-	-ful
In-	-ship

For the morphology project, students were required to print out 750 words from a Wikipedia article on any topic that they were interested in and to circle all prefixes

and suffixes in the article. One aim of this activity was also to make students familiar with how free online resources such as Wikipedia can be used for effective language study.

The syntax module also targeted individual study. In this module students completed a multiple-choice grammar test in Moodle. Items on the grammar diagnostic were associated with specific grammatical targets, and performance on the grammar test was used to assign individual grammar activities for the areas where each student showed the most difficulty. Overall, students were least accurate with perfect aspect, particularly in past perfect contexts (e.g., I had never studied Korean before coming to MIC).

Pragmatics

The pragmatics reading article focused primarily on speech acts (Searle, 1969). This article introduced the variables of power, social distance, and imposition from classical politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and illustrated how these may influence the language that we use.

> 7. In pragmatics, researchers will often look at how people do things like refuse, request, or promise in different situations. Some variables that influence the language people use are power (Is the person a boss or employee? Is the person a teacher or a student?), social distance (Have the people known each other for or long time or did they just meet?), and imposition (How much are you bothering the other person? Are you asking to borrow a pen or a car?).

Students were also asked to consider other factors that influence linguistic choices that they make. Several other variables that came up during discussion were gender, age, formality, rights/entitlements, and emergencies.

For the first language related exercise in the pragmatics unit, I asked students to write an imaginary e-mail to me scheduling an appointment to meet after class. This

was intended to establish a baseline in their e-mail practices. I then presented students with anonymized e-mails that I had written to professors, friends, and colleagues. Each of these e-mails involved me scheduling a time to meet the other person. Students were asked to try to determine my relationship with each person (i.e., was this person my superior, colleague, friend, etc.) from the language used in the e-mail. The purpose of this exercise was to promote pragmatic awareness by getting students to consider how interpersonal variables influence the language forms we use. I chose to use my own e-mails for this assignment to ensure that language was authentic. Also, I wanted to illustrate that this was simply how I had written e-mails and that other people may choose to use different wording or phrasing.

8. E-mail identification task

Hi <Last Name>,

Can I request a time to meet in the coming week?

Thank you

The final project for the pragmatics module required students to reflect on their own language use in e-mails. For this assignment, students reviewed the practice e-mails that they wrote earlier in the course and then wrote three more imaginary request e-mails to me. In general, students used more indirect request strategies after completing the module, although several students did continue to use the same direct forms they had used at the beginning of the course.

Second Language Learning and Teaching

The final module focused on major changes in second language acquisition theory from the 1960s to the early 2,000s. The reading article addressed research related to the role of input (Krashen 1982), output (Swain, 1985), and interaction (Long, 1996).

Before introducing the reading article, students completed a survey about their beliefs related to language learning and language teaching from Lightbown and Spada (2013, p. 3). Table 1 presents an abbreviated version of this survey. Students then discussed their opinions on these topics in groups. The final project for this module was for students to complete the survey again and to discuss if any of their opinions had changed from class discussion or from information covered in the reading article.

Table 1

Language learning survey (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 3)

	Strongly Agree – Agree – Disagree – Strongly Disagree
1 Languages are learned mainly through imitation.	Strongly Agree – Agree – Disagree – Strongly Disagree
2 Parents usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors.	Strongly Agree – Agree – Disagree – Strongly Disagree
3 Highly intelligent people are good language learners.	Strongly Agree – Agree – Disagree – Strongly Disagree
4 The most important predictor of success in second language acquisition is motivation.	Strongly Agree – Agree – Disagree – Strongly Disagree
5 The earlier a second language is introduced in school programs, the greater the likelihood of success in learning.	Strongly Agree – Agree – Disagree – Strongly Disagree

Areas for future development

Students generally responded positively to the exercises in this course. Although only impressionistic, students seemed to favor the phonetics/phonology and pragmatics modules over the morphology and syntax modules. This may be because the

assignments for the morphology/syntax modules were more like conventional classroom language activities. In the case of the morphology project, students also reported difficulty with discerning the meaning of prefixes in English, and this most likely reflects the great deal of semantic overlap between morphological prefixes in English (e.g., *dis*trust and *mis*trust). Greater preparation and planning in the presentation of this material could potentially alleviate some of the challenges that students faced in this area. Students also showed little change in their perceptions of language learning at the end of the second language acquisition module. It is not clear if this was because they did not find the information in the reading article convincing or if they simply had difficulty understanding the article. More time may be needed for students to integrate knowledge gained from this module into their own belief systems.

Moving forward, I would like to develop instruments for measuring how linguistics instruction influences language study habits and learning goals of students and whether this contributes to greater language learner autonomy. Increasingly, second language researchers are recognizing that teaching learners how to learn language is an integral component of language instruction (Cohen, 2011; Shively, 2011), and content area linguistics courses may prove to be a valuable vehicle for getting students to think about their own language learning practices.

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