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Abstract. The first author has designed and implemented college English classes emphasizing face-to-face oral interactions within small groups of students in class, presupposing and expecting further cultivation of learners’ ability to learn for themselves, by themselves and among themselves. Previous experiences confirm such expectations, and the authors are currently working on collecting learners’ spoken interactions with high-quality digital audio and video recording devices along with written materials, scores of language proficiency tests and questionnaire responses of those students. In this presentation, we describe the scope and objective of our project, summarize class activities and recording procedures, and then touch on expected transcription procedures and possible tools for annotation. It may be interesting to notice, in passing, how introduction of various recording devices positively affect students’ motivations and performances in their language learning activities.

Keywords: spoken corpora, learner corpora, annotation, learner profiling, automated spoken language test, transcription tools.

1 Introduction

Learner corpora, or collection of data produced by learners of a given language, are drawing greater attention in recent years. Among English-language educators in Japan, more and more emphasis is being placed on cultivating ‘communicative competence’ of the learners, but it is often difficult to fathom, for English-language teaching faculty at universities, what their students know about and can do with English. This is partly because learning experiences and mastery of English before they enter college differ greatly in depth and coverage, and the situation is getting aggravated by recent MEXT\(^2\) initiatives to diversify educational institutions, systems and curricula in Japan.

In the research project outlined below, our focus is on obtaining utterance data that are produced by the learners on the fly and relatively spontaneously. Since Japanese learners of English do not utter English sentences completely spontaneously and completely on the fly, we need to set things up in such a way that would invite those learners to express themselves in English. One such device is providing a question in English read by their peer learners and giving a restricted time-frame in which to respond to those questions. Although the learners are constrained in the topics (or the questions they are expected to answer to) and the length (in general, they are given 10 seconds to think and 45 seconds to answer after a question is read aloud twice), there is much freedom and flexibility in what can actually be said.

At the moment, our research project is in a data-acquisition phase, and it is rather premature to say what insights we might be able to obtain from the collection of data. However, it is our expectation that there is interesting knowledge to be extracted from the compiled data. Depending on the topic or the particular question asked, on the one hand, and the ingenuity and proficiency in oral English of the respondent, the responses or the sentences uttered would show a wide range of difference, in the vocabulary and expressions used, in accuracy in construction and choice of words and phrases, in pronunciation and fluency, and in the kinds of errors to be found. If each response came with indications of the speaker’s English proficiency, such as might be measured by TOEIC\(^3\), Versant for English\(^4\) and other standardized tests, we should be able to make interesting pedagogical observations from these data.

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1 As far as Japanese learners of English are concerned, data on written language are relatively widely accumulated and some are made publicly accessible but data on spoken language are scarcer and harder to obtain. A well-known exception to this may be NICT JLE Corpus, which is a compiled and annotated collection of spoken English produced by Japanese learners of English, but the published corpus contains only the transcribed material and not the original speech. See [3] and [4].


3 TOEIC, or Test of English for International Communication, is a standardized test of English focusing on reading and listening comprehension and is widely accepted in Japan and Korea: http://www.toeic.or.jp/toeic_en/

Some additional details are discussed in Section 3.2.

4 Versant for English is an automated test of spoken English delivered over the phone: http://www.versanttest.com

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