A Summary of My Research Programme

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My research programme focuses on examining whether, to what degree, why and how second language (L2) learners differentially develop pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary and grammar aspects of speech according to learner-extrinsic factors (how L2 learners have practiced the target language with different ages of onset) and learner-internal factors (to what extent they are cognitively and socially adept at L2 learning). For practical relevance, I have also delved into how a combination of form-focused (explicit instruction, corrective feedback) and meaning-oriented (e.g., face-to-face/video-based interaction) instruction can help adult learners develop their second language oral proficiency in the most effective and efficient manner.

1. HOW TO ASSESS L2 SPEECH?

Given the significance of L2 speech assessment, much research attention has been directed towards how native speakers perceive and process second language (L2) learners' accented speech for the purpose of successful communication. My research has analyzed which linguistic errors are relatively detrimental (or unrelated) to native speakers' intuitive judgements of comprehensibility (i.e., ease of understanding) in L2 speech.

1-1. Measuring important pronunciation features of comprehensible L2 speech

In collaboration with Pavel Trofimovich (Concordia University, Canada), Talia Isaacs (University College London) and Dustin Crowther (Michigan State University, US), I have investigated the role of phonological information in native speakers' comprehensibility

assessment in three contexts: Francophone learners in Montreal (Saito et al., 2017), Japanese learners of English in Canada (Saito et al., 2016), and a range of ESL students in Montreal (Crowther et al., 2015a, 2015b, 2017). The findings were also replicated in the context of L2 learners of Japanese (Saito & Akiyama, 2017c).

1-2. Measuring important vocabulary features of comprehensible L2 speech

To further expand this vein of L2 speech research, I have also examined diverse domains of lexical usage (e.g., appropriateness, fluency, variation, sophistication, abstractness, sense relations) in comprehensible L2 speech. The research team consisted of Stuart Webb (Western University, Canada), Pavel Trofimovich (Concordia University, Canada), and Talia Isaacs (University College London). Our work will be published in several venues (e.g., Saito et al., 2016a, 2016b).

1-3. Monolingual vs. multilingual raters' perception of L2 speech

Natsuko Shintani (University of Auckland, NZ) and I have corroborated on how native speakers with different backgrounds (e.g., multilinguals vs. monolinguals, linguists vs. non-linguists) differentially perceive L2 speech. In particular, we are interested in these expert vs. novice raters' processing of phonological, lexical and grammatical information during their L2 speech assessment. Our work will be published in several venues (e.g., Saito & Shintani, 2016a, 2016b; Shintani et al., 2017).

1-4. Human judgements of L2 speech

In order to develop and validate more practical, intuitive, and efficient ways of measuring L2 speech, Pavel Trofimovich, Talia Isaacs, and I have worked on examining whether and to what degree human raters (with and without pedagogical/linguistic backgrounds) can be trained to reliably assess multiple dimensions of L2 speech (e.g., segmentals, prosody, rhythm, fluency,

lexical appropriateness/richness, grammatical accuracy/complexity), which have traditionally been analyzed by computerized acoustic and corpus-based instruments. We elaborated a rater training procedure as well as a computerized L2 speech assessment program, Z-LAB.

- Find a programing code for our Z-LAB Software (https://github.com/ZeshanYao/Z-Lab)
- See our validation and generalization study (Saito et al., 2017)

1-5. Acoustic analyses of L2 speech

As a part of various collaborations with Murray Munro, Tracey Derwing and Xianghua Wu (Simon Fraser University, Canada), I have worked on the modeling of the acoustic characteristics of L2 speech, specifically English vowels (Munro, Derwing, & Saito, 2013), English approximants (Saito & Brajot, 2013; Saito & Munro, 2014), English suprasegmetnals (Saito, Ilkan, Magne, Tran, & Suzuki, in press) and Mandarin tones (Saito & Wu, 2014).

2. HOW DOES L2 SPEECH ACQUISITION OCCUR?

The second objective of my research program is to examine how adult L2 learners can enhance the linguistic qualities of their speech production in naturalistic (e.g., immigrants) and classroom (e.g., EFL education, CLIL) contexts.

2-1. Naturalistic L2 speech learning

I have investigated how highly motivated Japanese learners of English with different lengths of residence (0 to 40 years) and ages of acquisition (16 to 40 years) can differentially improve their L2 speech in terms of segmentals (e.g., Saito, 2013; Saito & Brajot, 2013) and overall oral proficiency (e.g., Saito, 2015a, 2015b). The findings will shed some light on theoretical debates regarding the underlying mechanism of late bilingualism (e.g., Critical Period Hypothesis).

2-2. Instructed L2 speech learning

In collaboration with Keiko Hanzawa (Waseda University, Tokyo), I have taken a longitudinal approach towards investigating the extent to which, and in what ways, one academic year of foreign language classroom experience can facilitate the L2 oral proficiency development of 50+ first-year Japanese college students enrolled in traditional EFL (3 hours per week) and CLIL (15 hours per week) programs (which have different degrees of focus on form and meaning). Our work will be disseminated through publication (e.g., Saito & Hanzawa, 2016, 2017).

2-3. Individual differences

Recently, I have also become interested in how the extensive variability in L2 students' learning outcomes, especially in classroom SLA, can be attributed to a range of individual difference factors, such as integrative vs. instrumental motivation (Saito, Dewaele & Hanzawa, in press; Saito, Dewaele, Abe, & In'nami, under review) and explicit vs. implicit language learning aptitude (Saito, 2017, under review; Saito, Suzukida, & Sun, in press; Saito, Tierney, & Sun, under review).

3. HOW TO TEACH L2 SPEECH?

The third objective of my research program delves into how to optimize adult L2 learning processes via various types of focus-on-form instructional options (e.g., explicit vs. implicit, comprehension- vs. production-based) in meaning-oriented classrooms.

3-1. Explicit instruction

I have extensively examined how explicit instruction (i.e., providing metalinguistic explanation on target phonological features) can impact the development of L2 speech perception and production skills through intervention studies with more than 100 ESL and EFL students in the US and Japan (e.g., Saito, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015).

3-2. Corrective feedback (recasts)

One intriguing way of drawing L2 learners' attention to grammatical and lexical accuracy during meaning-oriented classrooms concerns the provision of corrective feedback (especially as a form of recasts). In collaboration with Roy Lyster (McGill University, Canada), I have tested whether this technique can impact L2 phonological acquisition (e.g., Saito, 2013; Saito & Lyster, 2012a, 2012b). We have also published a narrative as well as meta-analytic review on the role of corrective feedback in classroom SLA (e.g., Lyster & Saito, 2010)

3-3. Longitudinal effects of focus-on-form

Few practitioners and researchers disagree with the fundamental idea that conversational experience with native (and non-native) speakers contributes to L2 development to a great degree. Yet, no empirical studies have ever examined such an interaction-acquisition link from a longitudinal perspective. Yuka Akiyama (Georgetown University, US) and I have tracked the development of aural and oral ability of Japanese EFL college students engaged in weekly, one-hour conversation exchanges with native speakers in US via Google Hangout over one academic semester (Akiyama & Saito, 2016; Saito & Akiyama, 2017a, 2017b).

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