

Review of “Learning Japanese as a Second Language: A Processability Perspective”

Title	Learning Japanese as a Second Language: A Processability Perspective
Authors	Satomi Kawaguchi
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Reviewed by Masayoshi Ogino

Processability Theory (PT henceforth; Pienemann, 1998) is a prominent psycholinguistic theory of second language acquisition (SLA), aiming to determine and explain what causes the development of linguistic competence to follow a describable route. “Learning Japanese as a Second Language: A Processability Perspective” presents the first in-depth study of Japanese as a second language (L2) within the framework of PT.

Pienemann’s *Teachability Hypothesis* (1984) claims that “instruction can only promote language acquisition if the interlanguage (IL) is close to the point when the structure to be taught is acquired in the natural setting” (Pienemann, 1988, p. 60), and has been incorporated into PT. This theory sheds light on the effectiveness of teaching intervention, interlanguage variability and stabilization, and it would be beneficial, therefore, for language-related professionals, including teachers, to understand this theory. However, it is not always easy to have a thorough comprehension of PT simply by reading a number of research papers. This is firstly because of the wide diversity of research in its focus, target grammatical phenomenon and languages, and secondly because of the difficulty in understanding the formalization of PT, including syntactic theory, Lexical and Functional Grammar (LFG) and incremental procedural grammar (Kempen & Hoenkamp, 1987). While “Studying Processability Theory: An Introductory Textbook” (Pienemann & Kessler, 2011) targets readers with substantial prior knowledge on linguistics and psycholinguistics, this book provides readers with a comprehensive picture of PT by progressively presenting theoretical background including LFG and the speech processing model, followed by a detailed account of empirical research targeting Japanese L2.

Chapter Two, following the introductory Chapter One, describes the theoretical applicability of PT to languages typologically different from German and English, in which PT was originally tested. This section presents a sufficient and necessary historical sketch of SLA research starting with Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, and then gradually guides readers to the Multidimensional Model (Meisel, Clahsen, & Pienemann, 1981) and PT, with an informative account of LFG and the original and more recent model of speech processing (Levelt, 1989; Levelt, Roelofs, & Meyer, 1999). The last two sections of this chapter review some of the influential studies on the acquisition of syntax and morphology in Japanese L2, followed by the introduction of studies that applied PT to Japanese L2 up to 2004. Although PT has undergone further development recently (e.g.

Pienemann, 2005), Kawaguchi focused on the earlier version of PT (Pienemann, 1998) and only briefly mentioned the updated PT. This might be a little unsatisfactory to some readers who are hoping to gain cutting-edge insights within the context of a theoretically further developed PT from this book.

Chapter Three outlines the application of PT to Japanese L2, with the description of typological features of Japanese. Based on the processing hierarchy within PT, predictions on morphological and syntactic structures of Japanese L2 were presented with formal representation using LFG. Some of the sections in this chapter may be a little challenging for some readers, as they are required to understand Japanese grammar, including the inflectional paradigm of lexical verbs and abbreviated terminology along with LFG as a representation of grammatical structures of Japanese – concepts with which some readers may still be unfamiliar.

Chapter Four presents the research questions and methodology of empirical studies, including four longitudinal studies (with one Portuguese first language (L1), one French L1 and two English L1 learners of Japanese as informants), and one cross-sectional study. One of the longitudinal studies is based on a three-year data collection procedure, two others were conducted over two years, and the last one over one year. The cross-sectional study, which involves 28 Japanese L2 learners at a university, places itself in a unique position to test the extent of the generalized nature of the results gained from the longitudinal studies. The objective of the combined studies is to test the typological plausibility of PT through hypothesizing and investigating the developmental stages of verbal morphology and syntax of an agglutinating language such as Japanese. This approach makes it possible to provide readers with insights into the mechanism of language acquisition not gained from descriptive, explanatory and inductive studies on developmental sequences of particular grammatical aspects. Following Pienemann (1998), Kawaguchi employed distributional analysis, implicational scaling and the use of ‘emergence’ as opposed to ‘mastery’ (i.e. accuracy rate) as a point of acquisition, and examined learner language including causative, passive and benefactive sentences that are at Stage 4 (morpholexical operation) in her hypothesized processing hierarchy.

Chapter Five starts with a description of the method of distributional analysis and the scoring procedure of the data. This is because identification and quantification of language specific structures is necessary for the analysis. This is followed by the presentation of results. The analysis of the three-year longitudinal studies is especially detailed, which gives readers a clear picture of the development of structures of this informant. This chapter also reports the results from a “focused cross-sectional study” (p. 256), which aimed to investigate the generalizability of the results of the longitudinal studies. Kawaguchi draws from the results of the longitudinal and cross-sectional studies and reports that the acquisition of morphology and syntax was found to be in the following order: word/lemma > lexical procedure > S-procedure. This suggests that the acquisition of lower procedural skills is a prerequisite for the functioning of higher level skills in the processing hierarchy, thus supporting Kawaguchi’s hypotheses and PT.

In the brief concluding chapter, the author summarises her findings on the developmental sequences, and briefly refers to issues of theory construction and practical applications. The most important claim and implication in this chapter is that “grammatical items are acquired in a fixed order regardless of the learner’s L1” (p. 298), and that “learners cannot skip any developmental stages” (p. 298), which support the typological plausibility of PT and the Teachability Hypothesis. This conclusion is persuasive because of the robust data collection combining longitudinal and cross-sectional studies. The author also discusses implications of the study, including a PT-based language assessment and the need for the incorporation of the notions of PT stages and “psychological validity” (p. 299) in syllabus design. While this argument seems to reflect the findings of the study, it is not sufficiently stated how PT can be practically applied to syllabus design and pedagogy. It is likely that some morphological and syntactic structures fall to the same stages in the processing hierarchy (e.g. Loewen & Nabei, 2007), and further discussion would be desired.

In summary, “Learning Japanese as a Second Language: A Processability Perspective” makes an excellent guide to understanding PT. It demonstrates the application of PT to a typologically different language, leading to generalization of PT and deepening the reader’s understanding of the L2 acquisition process through the window of Japanese L2 acquisition. While PT may have “its

own principles and ideas, its own self-contained methodology and theory, the rationale for which is not always obvious to outsiders” (Cook, 2012, p. 4), Kawaguchi provides readers with a clear rationale, and sets the focus of her book within the SLA domain without falling into fragmentation of theory and research.

Kawaguchi has been at the frontier of the application of PT to Japanese since the publication of her article “Acquisition of Japanese verbal morphology: Applying processability theory to Japanese” (Kawaguchi, 2000). She has now expanded the domain of PT and refined its concepts, and has succeeded in providing the reader with an overview of the development of PT and empirical evidence in this well organized book. I highly recommended this book not only to Japanese language professionals and to those who are interested in testing the plausibility of PT in other languages, but also to those who are keen on enhancing their knowledge on the mechanisms of language acquisition.

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