

Second Language Perception of Japanese /Cju/ and /Cjo/ Sequences by Mandarin-Speaking Learners of Japanese

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Abstract : In the field of second language (L2) speech learning, it is well-known that that learner's first language (L1) phonetic and phonological characteristics will be transferred into their L2 production and perception, which lead to foreign accent. For L1 Mandarin learners of Japanese, the confusion of /u/ and /o/ in /CjV/ sequences has been observed in their utterance frequently. L1 transfer is considered to be the cause of this issue, however, other factors which influence the identification of /Cju/ and /Cjo/ sequences still under investigation. This study investigates the perception of Japanese /Cju/ and /Cjo/ units by L1 Mandarin learners of Japanese. It further examined whether learners' proficiency, syllable position, phonetic features of preceding consonants and background noise affect learners' performance in perception. Fifty-two Mandarin-speaking learners of Japanese and nine native Japanese speakers were recruited to participate in an identification task. Learners were divided into beginner, intermediate and advanced level according to their Japanese proficiency. The average correct rate was used to evaluate learners' perceptual performance. Furthermore, the comparison of the correct rate between learners' groups and the control group was conducted as well to examine learners' nativelikeness. Results showed that background noise tends to pose an adverse effect on distinguishing /u/ and /o/ in /CjV/ sequences. Secondly, Japanese proficiency has no influence on learners' perceptual performance in the quiet and in background noise. Then all learners did not reach a native-like level without the distraction of noise. Beginner level learners performed less native-like, although higher level learners appeared to have achieved nativelikeness in the multi-talker babble noise. Finally, syllable position tends to affect distinguishing /Cju/ and /Cjo/ only under the noisy condition. Phonetic features of preceding consonants did not impact learners' perception in any listening conditions. Findings in this study can give an insight into a further understanding of Japanese vowel acquisition by L1 Mandarin learners of Japanese. In addition, this study indicates that L1 transfer is not the only explanation for the confusion of /u/ and /o/ in /CjV/ sequences, factors such as listening condition and syllable position are also needed to take into consideration in future research. It also suggests the importance of perceiving speech in a noisy environment, which is close to the actual conversation required more attention to pedagogy.

Keywords : background noise, Chinese learners of Japanese, /Cju/ and /Cjo/ sequences, second language perception

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