# OPI: AN ANALYSIS OF VARIATION WITHIN THE ADVANCED LEVEL

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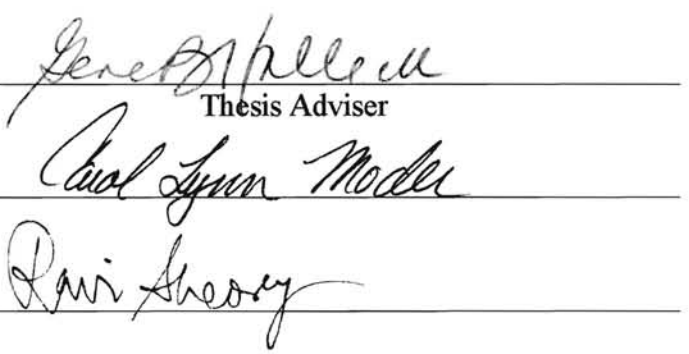

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# CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) is one of the products of the movement towards achieving and assessing all areas of communicative competence in foreign language teaching. It is a testing instrument measuring a person's oral proficiency in a foreign language. Because of its novelty in taking the form of an interview and giving a global score, the OPI has received both praise and criticism as to its content validity, reliability, and the nature of its rating.

One of the major arguments concerning the OPI addresses the question of whether it is a discrete-point or communicative test; this dispute itself arises from confusion over the role of grammar in a communicative test, which the OPI claims itself to be. Linguists have criticized the OPI rating for relying too heavily on linguistic accuracy (Savignon, 1985; Kramsch, 1986; Van Lier, 1989; Raffaldini, 1988); on the other hand, some empirical research has been done to prove the opposite, which is that the OPI is indeed a communicative test (Magnan, 1988; Halleck, 1992; Byrnes, 1987b). Byrnes (1987a) also noticed "the increased weight the scale accords the sociolinguistic component" (p. 170).

Efforts have also been made to clear up the confusion as to the definition of "grammar," ranging from specific syntactic and morphological features to the notion that grammar equals appropriateness (Wieland, 1987; Garrett, 1987; Galloway, 1987). In the 1986 ACTFL Assessment Criteria of Speaking Proficiency (Buck, 1989), "accuracy" is one of the criteria for each level. According to the criteria, Superiors, the top end of the scale, make only errors which virtually never interfere with communication or disturb the native speaker; Advanced speakers can be understood without difficulty by speakers

unaccustomed to non-native speakers; Intermediates can be understood, with some repetition, by speakers accustomed to non-native speakers; Novices may be difficult to understand, even for those accustomed to non-native speakers (Buck, 1989). Although some people, such as Galloway, insist that "accuracy" is broader than just "grammar," some applied linguists still argue that in the ACTFL Guidelines "the term accuracy was indeed used to refer specifically to language-specific syntactic and morphological features" (Wieland, 1987, p. 189).

In the present study, grammar is treated in its narrowest sense, excluding sociolinguistic and communicative implications. This study examines purely the linguistic features in each OPI because the criticism that the OPI is a discrete-point test is essentially an argument that the OPI overemphasizes the linguistic proficiency of a foreign language learner as a criterion for determining his or her rating. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to find out how grammatically based the OPI ratings are at the Advanced level, by examining quantitatively the kinds of grammatical errors in finite verb usage made by twenty subjects from four language backgrounds: Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish. Because the 1986 ACTFL Guidelines explicitly describe the global tasks/functions at the advanced level as being able to describe and narrate in major time/aspect frames, an analysis of the errors in finite verb usage is the focus of this study. Group performances are compared against each other to determine if there are any significant differences between the four language groups, and if there are, how much of a role first language transfer or interference may play in causing the variation.

Although the significance of first language interference has been rejected by many researchers and applied linguists, there has been an extensive body of research which shows that there is first language transfer, both positive and negative, in second or foreign language acquisition (Corder, 1974; Vriend, 1988; Schachter & Rutherford, 1983; Zhao, 1989). This paper intends to provide some empirical data to assess the extent to which

first language interference may affect grammatical accuracy in using finite verbs in English, thus examining the reliability of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis.

Therefore, the research questions asked in this study are as follows: Are there significant differences in accuracy in finite verb usage by different language groups at the advanced level? If there are, what conclusions can be drawn about the nature of the OPI and OPI rating? Are those differences caused by first language influence? If not, what might be other possible explanations?

To answer the questions above, Chapter Two reviews relevant literature on the history of the OPI, communicative competence and communicative testing, proficiency and oral proficiency, criticism of the OPI as a discrete-point test, contrastive analysis and various reappraisals of contrastive analysis.

Chapter Three is a brief chapter introducing major syntactic and morphological features of finite verbs in each of the four first languages of subjects included in this study, predicting potential problem areas when speaking English for each language group, in line with contrastive analysis.

Chapter Four explains the methods used in this study. The taxonomy used in classifying various the types of error found in the twenty interviews was derived from Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), but expanded to meet the needs of this study. This study recognized ten different types of error in finite verb usage: 1) auxiliary problems, 2) absent finite verb, 3) conditional problems, 4) verb-preposition problems, 5) voice problems, 6) form problems, 7) lexical verb problems, 8) word order problems, 9) subject-verb disagreement problems, 10) tense/aspect problems. Pearson chi-square tests were used to determine the significance of differences in the frequencies of occurrence of some of the major error types by language group.

Chapter Five reports the results of the study. The results show significant differences in error frequency in tense/aspect, subject-verb agreement, and error in finite verbs in general, but no significant differences in error frequency in the choice of lexical

verbs or auxiliary problems. For the three types of error where there is a significant difference between language groups, the rankings of the four groups remain the same in descending order of incorrect use: Chinese, Russians, Japanese, and Spanish.

Chapter Six discusses the results presented in Chapter Five. Our data reject CA-based hypotheses made earlier, confirming the inadequacy of contrastive analysis as a theory to account for difficulties and errors in second language acquisition. Possible explanations for the group differences are explored, including overgeneralization, individual variation, and English teaching methodology in the subjects' home countries. The significant variation by group as well as individual variation within the advanced level provide evidence that the OPI is not a discrete-point test of grammar, suggesting that at the advanced level communicative competence seems to be an important factor that influences the rater's decision. A brief discussion is also included on the nature of OPI ratings.

Chapter Seven discusses the implications of the research and offers suggestions for further work.

## CHAPTER II

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) has attracted a considerable amount of attention since it was introduced to academia in 1982. Applied linguists and researchers have expressed a variety of opinions praising and criticizing the nature of the test and its various aspects. Most of the criticism has centered around its validity: What does it actually test?

### Historical Perspective

The original model for the present Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) was an interview test used by the American government, the FSI (Foreign Service Institute of the US Department of State), to test the foreign language oral proficiency of its own staff (Hiple,1987; Liskin-Gasparro, 1987a). During the 1970's, the test and its rating scale became known to the civilian world. For example, it was used in bilingual teacher certification in some states. The FSI oral proficiency test experienced several periods of refining and adapting by the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) and Educational Testing Service (ETS) before it was introduced by ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) into the academic world (Liskin-Gasparro, 1987b). The ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines (ACTFL Provisional, 1982) were published in 1982, and the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines which are used at present came out in 1986 (Hiple, 1987; Bragger, 1985). In order to illustrate the changes that have been made since the original FSI oral proficiency test, the original rating scale is shown here:

Level 0: No functional ability in the language

Level 1: Elementary or survival proficiency

Sufficient command of the language to get along in the country for a day or two in the way a tourist might.

Level 2: Limited working proficiency

Sufficient ability in the language to carry out routine linguistic requirements for a job, such as that of a visa officer, who helps applicants fill out forms.

Level 3: Professional working proficiency

Sufficient command of the language to carry out the linguistic requirements of most professional-level jobs.

Level 4: Full professional proficiency, or representational proficiency

Language proficiency that enables the speaker to carry out even the most linguistically demanding jobs, such as negotiations, interpreting in formal meetings, etc.

Level 5: Educated native speaker proficiency

A speaker at this level is in all ways indistinguishable from an educated native speaker of the language (Liskin-Gasparro, 1987b).

Instead of six levels, the present ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines have only four major levels: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior (See Appendix A). The top levels of the FSI test, 3, 4, and 5 have been collapsed into the Superior level "since formal education in a foreign language will usually bring an individual only to level 3 (with real experience in the target culture creating the 4 and 5)" (Bragger, 1985, p.43). Conversely, the lower end was expanded, leaving three sub-levels in the Novice and Intermediate levels, which respectively are Novice-low, Novice-mid, Novice-high, and Intermediate-low, Intermediate-mid, Intermediate-high. Although the names of these levels themselves

never caused any ripples, their descriptors sparked quite a lot of controversy concerning whether the OPI is a communicative test or a test of grammar.

## Communicative Competence and Communicative Testing

Because of the fact that the OPI claims to test use of language, that is, "function, context or content," and "accuracy" (Bragger, 1985, p. 47), rather than grammar in its pure linguistic sense, its birth and application in language teaching curriculum development have attracted a great deal of attention, both favorable and unfavorable. One reason for the controversy is doubt about the test's underlying construct of communicative competence (Savignon, 1985), defined by Hymes (1974) as consisting of the native speaker's intuitive knowledge of the linguistic rules of his language and also of his knowledge of the social rules such as conventions, registers, and protocols. This was followed by Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence, including grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence, which seems to be the most accepted. Grammatical competence refers to a person's ability in using the syntax, lexicon, and phonology of a foreign language accurately. Sociolinguistic competence, on the other hand, allows the language learner to choose a form that is the most appropriate in a particular situation. Strategic competence is the ability to find a way to get the message across when language is lacking. Accordingly, developing only grammatical competence would not help the students to increase their ability to utter sentences which are contextually appropriate, and we must help the students to get their message across effectively by assessing, planning and carrying out communicative acts successfully (Tarone & Yule, 1989; Weir, 1990). Instead of using the same terminology, Widdowson (1983) used a different term "capacity" (p. 23), which is essentially identical with communicative competence but, according to Widdowson, is different for two reasons. He believes that competence seems to imply "conformity" (p. 25) to linguistic competence

and to communicative competence, giving the wrong impression that language is excessively rule governed.

For the same reason, the OPI has been criticized for being prescriptive because it employs clearly laid-out descriptors for each level (Bachman, 1988; Lantolf & Frawley, 1985 & 1988). Lantolf & Frawley (1985) even accused the OPI of being a "criterion-reductive" test, which means that the criteria are not referred to but instead constitute absolute levels and requirements.

Concerns have been expressed about the lack of research on specific measurement of communication strategies or their relationship to the other abilities (Weir, 1990), but it has been noticed that there has been a shift from an emphasis on linguistic accuracy to the communicative aspects of language use (Weir, 1990). As we can imagine, communicative testing means measuring the ability to take part in communicative acts (Hughes, 1989). Hughes explicitly suggests that it is usually communicative ability that we want to test.

But why should we test communicative competence? This question has been very well answered by Canale (1984 & 1988), who believes that measurement tools help us understand our students and our teaching, and many important educational decisions are often based on evaluation results. Besides, "without sound means of evaluation, it is difficult to assess and compare competing approaches or strategies in language pedagogy in an objective and defensible manner" (1984, p. 79). One challenge in testing communicative competence is how to characterize stages in its development (Canale, 1988). This problem is challenged, if not completely solved, by ACTFL in its efforts to define levels of communicative language proficiency, which are illustrated in its descriptors.

Proficiency and Oral Proficiency

The concept of proficiency, a term which is often used interchangeably with such words as "good, fluent, knowledgeable, bilingual, and competent" (Galloway, 1987), fits in with the trend of gearing teaching to help students achieve communicative competence, which started in the 1970s. It means the ability to use a foreign or a second language (Heilenman & Kaplan, 1985; Tarone & Yule, 1989; Hadley, 1993). A very thorough definition comes from Savignon (1972):

> *Communicative competence* may be defined as the ability to function in a truly communicative setting - that is, in a dynamic exchange in which *linguistic competence* must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors (p. 8).

Nevertheless, different linguists and researchers define proficiency in slightly different ways, ranging from viewing proficiency as simply the ability to use the structures of a language (Fries, 1945) to equating proficiency fully with communicative competence. In this communicative era, however, a good description that can summarize the most recent definitions seems to be "the ability to communicate accurately in whichever language modality is pertinent to the communicative requirements of the situation" (Larson & Jones, 1984), which is knowledge of the language in its entirety (Magnan, 1985). The ACTFL Guidelines help us to understand what it is to know a language in a more precise manner (Omaggio, 1984) by laying out clearly the requirements, both linguistic and paralinguistic, for each level. For example, at the advanced level, a learner should be able to

- satisfy the requirements of school and/or work situations.
- narrate and describe in major time/aspect frames.
- sustain paragraph discourse.
- talk about a variety of topics, including work and current events.

- initiate, sustain and conclude a social interaction or a conversation involving a transactional situation with a complication.
- participate as a full conversational partner, initiating exchanges as well as responding.
- be understood by those unaccustomed to dealing with non-native speakers.

(Buck, 1989)

However, in recent years, the tendency has been to stretch definitions of terms such as "proficiency" and "communicative competence" to include almost anything the user believes to be good or right. Concerned with such misconceptions, Hadley tried to clarify what proficiency is not (1993). According to her, "proficiency is not a theory of language acquisition; proficiency is not a method of language teaching; proficiency is not a curricular outline or syllabus; proficiency does not imply a preoccupation with grammar or error" (pp. 33-34). This notion makes the OPI controversial as a proficiency test because of its punishment of grammatical error.

The proficiency movement is best known through the Oral Proficiency Interview (Magnan, 1985), which reflects the pursuit of communicative competence in testing oral proficiency. Van Lier suggests three "preconditions for a display of oral proficiency" which are "face to face interaction, decision-making opportunities, goal-relatedness" (1989, pp. 493-494), which are fulfilled by the OPI. The ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines were the first attempt to provide specifications for levels of proficiency (Hadley, 1993). It is also these specifications that invited some criticism of the logic and validity of the OPI as an analytic test (Lantolf and Frawley, 1985; Bachman, 1988). Because in the ACTFL 1986 Proficiency Guidelines (see Appendix), there are specific grammar requirements for each level, the OPI has made itself vulnerable to some criticism that it is in fact a discrete point test (Savignon, 1985; Kramsch, 1986; van Lier, 1989).

Based on a very different tenet from those of communicative tests, discrete point tests focus on certain syntactic and lexical features, believing that a language can be

examined piece by piece (Whiteson, 1981; Magnan, 1985; Hughes 1989; Farhady, 1979). In the current communicative age of teaching a foreign or a second language, attention to discrete segments of a language is not encouraged. In spite of the good intentions of "diagnosing learner strengths and weakness, prescribing curricula aimed at particular skills, and developing specific teaching strategies to help learners overcome particular weaknesses" (Oller, 1979, p. 211), discrete point methods have proved ineffective because their theoretical assumption that a language can be analyzed into bits and pieces is wrong. It is thus important to consider the communicative function of language as a whole.

Is the OPI a Communicative Test or a Discrete Point Test?

In spite of the fact that most people have come to a consensus that all tests should examine communicative competence, our knowledge of "what constitutes CC (communicative competence) is scanty and as a result it is difficult to construct valid tests" (Whiteson, 1981, p. 346). Just because the OPI approximates authentic oral verbal interactions, it has enjoyed tremendous popularity. Clark (1975) claimed that oral proficiency is usually associated with conversational situations, therefore justifying the conversational format of an interview test. However, Shohamy (1987) pointed out that the speech style and functions associated with an interview are only one type of oral interaction and that there are other oral interaction styles.

An issue concerning the extent to which the OPI tests communicative competence is its validity. The fact that the OPI only provides a single, global score for each interviewee has made it a target of criticism and has led to doubts about the validity of interpretations and uses of scores (Bachman, 1988). Bachman argued that it is hard to distinguish performance from test methods, especially in oral interviews, and therefore the validity of the rating as an indicator of language ability is reduced. Another major complaint concerning the guidelines is that they are experientially based (Valdman, 1988)

and things "are true by definition only" (Lantolf & Frawley, 1985, p. 339). Claims have been made that criterion-referenced tests impose competencies on the examinees. In other words, "the Guidelines are, in fact, the constructions of theorists and they prescribe what a speaker ought to be able to do" (Lantolf & Frawley, 1985, p. 341). Of course, the central issue in this discussion is the educated native speaker as the ultimate standard in the rating scale (Barnwell, 1989). Does such a standard exist? Barnwell noticed the fact that no research had been carried out to measure how native speakers would perform in a similar situation, and until empirical evidence is found that the oral interview reflects how the native speaker performs, the OPI should not be accepted as valid. People who hold such point of view call for research to develop a clearer understanding of what being a "proficient speaker of a language" means.

Critical of the generic evaluation scale of the OPI (used for English and other languages which do not have specific guidelines yet), especially the language-specific guidelines where certain constructions must be used by a testee for him or her to be given a certain score, a number of critics described the OPI as governed by grammar. Savignon (1985) argues that "a 'Grammar Grid' has been prepared for each language, showing which constructions must be used consistently in order for a testee to qualify for a given rating" (p. 132). Her criticism is based on the belief that communication is more than knowing the surface structures of a language (p. 131). Kramsch (1986) made similar comments about the OPI's emphasis on accuracy "to the detriment of discourse aptitude" (p. 367). She saw the Guidelines scale as "linear" and "cumulative" for the reason that the grading hierarchy assumes that each successive level description subsumes the tasks of the previous ones. One example she gave is that an EFL learner may need to talk about past and future a long time before he/she reaches the advanced level, where control of the tense is required. That is one strong piece of evidence for her to argue that the ACTFL guidelines prioritize linguistic knowledge over functional uses. She obviously believes that the proficiency aimed at in the ACTFL Guidelines is grammatical correctness, which does

not automatically lead to interactional competence. Van Lier (1989) echoes Savignon by expressing his impression that raters rely heavily on certain grammatical features in rating an OPI, especially when a borderline decision has to be made. Raffaldini (1988) defined the OPI as "a partial measure of communicative ability" (p. 198) based on her observation that in the OPI the testee does not need to adapt his/her language to different contexts; instead he/she exchanges factual information or expresses opinion in a formal situation with a stranger. Therefore, she concludes that the OPI does not assess sociolinguistic competence. This whole argument was called the narrow-view argument by Hagen (1990), who rose above this issue by suggesting that, even if the OPI does emphasize grammatical competence, we cannot judge the correctness of this decision because of lack of any theoretical or empirical grounds.

However, advocates of the OPI deny the grammatical orientation of the test. Galloway (1987) tried to make a distinction between linguistic grammar and accuracy: "The guidelines for speaking thus presume a strong relationship between communicative success and grammatical accuracy in which "grammar" denotes the meaning access system" (p. 31). However, as Galloway pointed out, "accuracy" in the so-called "trisection" of the OPI (Bragger, 1985) is likely to cause confusion because it no longer refers to the traditional sense of grammatical correctness. It actually denotes the accuracy in the correspondence between sending and receiving a message. According to Galloway, accuracy includes the following continua:

deliberate---------- automatic

patterned---------- flexible

telegraphic/holophrastic---------- extended discourse

global/general---------- explicit, precise

frequent error patterns---------- infrequent, unpatterned error

inappropriateness---------- appropriateness

sympathetic listener---------- nonsympathetic listener (p. 31)

Apparently, grammar, meaning linguistic error, is only one of the considerations for accuracy, and most of the other aspects are concerned about whether the testee is in control of the language. "'Accuracy' is a term that is broader and more all-encompassing than the word 'grammar,' and it allows us to look at language from a more global point of view" (Bragger, 1985, p. 49).

A slightly differently shaded argument in favor of the OPI suggests that the ACTFL Guidelines are not designed to be discrete-point steps, but to act as a measurement of communicative competence (Galloway, 1987). This kind of test falls under Omaggio's (1980) category of "hybrid" tests which combine grammar and context, structure and situation together. Lowe (1985) also dealt with the gestalt nature of the score, saying that the global score assigned to the interviewee is bigger than the sum of the parts. "Testers do not scrutinize individual vocabulary items or grammatical structures, but assess how a candidate integrates them into the total performance" (p. 16). Because the guidelines are general in nature, not exhaustively prescribing the abilities required for each level, it takes a trained and experienced rater to recognize the dominant features in each performance and then assign it to the appropriate level (Lowe, 1985, 1986). In fact, when suggesting practical tests of communication, Canale (1984) actually recommended holistic scoring for evaluation of general achievement and proficiency. One very important feature characteristic of the ACTFL Guidelines noted by Lowe (1985) is that the grammar grid only reminds the rater of "patterns of strength" and "patterns of errors," and, therefore, "a single strength or error counts for nothing" (p. 26). Consequently, rating proves most accurate when the rater is not focused on the "bits and pieces," but rather on the "wholes" or "near wholes" (Lowe, 1986). Byrnes (1987b) reinforces Lowe's opinion because she believes that "function" as the key to the guidelines indicates the task orientation of language, taking precedence over the traditional concept of accuracy being equated with "conscious knowledge of grammar or formal mastery in the structuralist tradition" (p. 45). That brings us to the question of the demands on the rater because the

accuracy of ratings "is apparently dependent on the ability of intelligent speakers of a language to assign scores to performances that are not defined in any adequate descriptive terminology" (Oller, 1979, p. 325).

Some experimental work has been done to see if the OPI rating is really sensitive to discrete linguistic points (Magnan, 1988; Halleck, 1992). Magnan attempted to provide empirical data on the importance of grammar in an OPI rating. Addressing the concern that the OPI is regressing toward structuralism, she defines grammar in her study as specifically the usage of particular morphological or syntactic features, including verb conjugation, tense/mood, determiners, adjectives, prepositions, object pronouns, and relative pronouns in French OPIs. Results show a decrease of error from Intermediate-low to Advanced-high and an increase from Novice-mid to Intermediate-low. These results are not surprising since "OPI testers generally recognize that each successive level of proficiency from Intermediate Low upward is characterized by increases in both quality and quantity" (p. 271). However, this is not an absolute relationship, as Magnan noticed that a person with a higher rating does not necessarily have speech which is more accurate in all the grammatical areas investigated than a person with a lower rating. Magnan, therefore, came to the conclusion that the criticism that the OPI places too much emphasis on grammatical categories is not fully justified, even though the test is indeed sensitive to the grammatical points examined in her study. Later, Halleck (1992) looked at the OPI from a different angle in an attempt to prove that the OPI is a communicative test. In her study, she used a number of interviews of Chinese speakers of English whose OPI scores ranged from Intermediate-mid to Superior. These interviews were rated by students in graduate programs in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), French Literature, and French Civilization at the Pennsylvania State University, who were trained by Halleck using ACTFL training materials. Later on, questionnaires were distributed and collected from the raters, asking them to list some of the more influential factors they considered

when rating OPIs. The results showed that discrete-point factors rarely influenced their decisions, but that communicative factors were the more influential.

As we can see, people have not been able to come to a consensus on whether the OPI is a test highly sensitive to grammar or a test that focuses on communicative abilities or a balanced combination of both. Byrnes (1987a) believes that linguistic and extra-linguistic abilities cannot be separated in a test like the OPI because the ACTFL rating scale focuses on "task universals, which the user is likely to be able to perform with that degree of linguistic competence" (p. 169). This may sound intuitive, but a better solution that can balance the two aspects of language use is at the moment absent. As the OPI is still a fairly new invention in foreign or second language assessment, empirical studies are still needed for many aspects of the test, especially with respect to its validity, that is, whether it tests grammar or communication. As mentioned earlier, Magnan (1988) investigated several grammatical points and did a cross-level analysis, but nobody has done a similar study focusing on one OPI level. Since variation in performance does exist not only across but also within levels (Lowe, 1986; Magnan, 1988), such a study is justified. Byrnes's (1987b) observation that "various accuracy factors make different contributions to the perception of proficiency" (p. 45) confirms the researcher's observation in her own rating experience that there exists some variation within each level. Based on the research to date, the present study is going to be a study of variation within one level.

## First Language Influence on the Performance on the OPI

Because each level in the OPI is a wide band, tolerating a certain degree of variation, we may ask if the influence of first language plays a role in contributing to the nature of this variation. No such research has been done concerning the OPI; as

mentioned in the introduction, this study was designed to examine variation between different language groups in the use of finite verbs at the Advanced level.

Fries (1945) and Lado (1957) were among the first people to propose the strong version of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, which claimed that all difficulties in learning a second language could be predicted through systematically comparing the learner's first language and the target language, based on the assumption that differences in syntax, morphology and phonology lead to difficulties, and that difficulties lead to errors (Ellis, 1985). Specific procedures were laid out to compare the grammars of the two languages (Lado, 1983), including locating the best structural description of the languages involved, summarizing all the structures, comparison of the two language structures, classifying single problems into larger patterns of difficulty.

The strong form has proved to be unworkable (Wardhaugh, 1983), for it is commonly accepted now that first language interference is only one of the many factors, maybe not even an important factor, in causing errors. The weak version (Wardhaugh, 1970), on the other hand, acknowledges that not all errors come from first language interference, but claims that it can identify which errors are the result of interference.

Cowan (1983) provided some principles which predict the occurrence of production errors:

> Principle 1: If the learner views the output of a rule *x* in the second language to be functionally equivalent to the output structure of a rule *y* in the native language, then rule *y* will tend to be applied in contexts where the learner deems *x* structures appropriate.
>
> Principle 2: When the learner employs Principle 1, the maximum possibility of errors occurring exists when the formal properties of rules *x* and *y* are antithetical. (p. 111)

Although these sound reasonable, Cowan did not tell us how we can determine whether the learner is using these principles because these are purely the learner's perception of

linguistic rules in native and target languages. Ellis (1985) summarized in a more objective way some of the linguistic possibilities that an analysis of two languages may reveal. According to Ellis, the best possibility of eliminating errors exists when there is no difference between a feature of the first and second language. The worst possible situation is when one item becomes two in the target language. For example, to know in English becomes zhīdào (to know a fact) or rènshi (to know somebody) in Chinese, depending on the context. In between these extremes are convergent phenomena, an item in the first language being absent in the second language, an item in the first language having a different distribution from its equivalent item in the target language, and no similarity between the two features in first and second language (Ellis, 1985).

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis was based on transfer theory, which suggested that language learning difficulty came from habits from the first language. Empirical studies have been conducted to test contrastive analysis. Schachter and Rutherford (1983) discovered that Chinese speakers produced with surprising regularity existential constructions with dummy subject there are, which can be translated into a very popular structure "yǒu," meaning "to have," in Chinese, expressing the existential idea. For example,

| yǒu | yíjia | fēijī | wàng | dōngbīanr | fēiguòqùle |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| existential | one (classifier) | plane | towards | east | fly past perf |

'There is an airplane headed toward the east.' (Lin, 1981, p. 118)

In this case, yǒu indicates the existence of a movement. However, the fact that the Chinese learners of English like to use the structure there are does not prevent them from producing errors in this type of structure; for example, There is a tire hanging from the roof served as their playground (Schachter & Rutherford, 1983). Because yǒu in this particular structure in Chinese functions to point out the subject who is carrying out the action (Lin, 1981), a real verb is needed such as fly in the example above. This may lead

the speaker to include the verb served in the English example. In such cases, the two researchers came to the conclusion that L1 discourse patterns can influence L2 syntax.

However, because contrastive analysis does not specify the conditions under which first language habits interfere, we are never sure if and when errors come purely from linguistic differences between the two languages. Taylor's (1975) study sheds some light on this issue because he discovered that intermediate ESL learners made more developmental errors than elementary level students, which suggests that first language interference may occur more often at the early stage of one's foreign or second language learning experience. Schachter's (1983) study offers a possible new account of first language influence. She investigated the relative clauses produced by Chinese, Japanese, Persian, and Arabic speakers of English, and showed that learners of a foreign language can make fewer errors by avoiding using a particular structure which does not exist in their first language. This evidence appears to contradict the more simplistic interpretation of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, although it does imply that contrastive analysis can probably predict when avoidance might happen. This point of view was later confirmed by Kleinmann's (1983) study, where strategies of avoidance were also found. However, although contrastive analysis can predict potential cases of avoidance, it cannot predict avoidance as opposed to the occurrence of a certain structure with an error (Kleinmann, 1983).

The basic theory of transfer on which the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis was based implies that the greater the differences between languages, the more difficult it is for the learner, and the more errors he or she will make. This simple assumption has been questioned by a number of people (Wode, 1976), who claim that errors may more likely take place when there are some similarities and some contrast between equivalent items in the first and second languages, than when there are no commonalities.

Some have expressed frustration at contrastive analysis because more often than not CA predicted difficulties that turned out not to exist for the students, in spite of the

detailed system of contrasting two languages (Schachter, 1983). This is because there are too many other variables that create problems for learners of a foreign or a second language. Dulay and Burt (1973) discovered four types of error sources: first language interference errors, developmental errors caused by inadequate knowledge of the grammatical rules of the target language, ambiguous errors which could be either transfer or developmental errors, and unique errors which are not related to first language interference or first language acquisition. Vriend (1988) did a study to see if Chinese speakers of English exceed other language groups in omitting or misusing English prepositions on the basis that the Chinese language does not have as extensive use of prepositions as English. The results, however, showed that the Chinese only had slightly more difficulty in using English prepositions than a general ESL group, indicating that contrastive analysis is too simplistic a view of language learning. Because second language learning is such a complex process, and there are many factors involved, no single mechanism can explain all the observed phenomena. Studies have shown contrastive analysis least predictive at the syntactic level (Richards, 1983). Results of Richards' studies revealed causes of error rather than first language interference, such as overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized. The ambitious claim of contrastive analysis, especially the strong version, has proved effective only in predicting phonological difficulties (Stockwell & Bowen, 1983; Ritchie, 1983).

Second language acquisition is an extremely complex task, involving many more factors than differences between two languages. Even though some people still favor the Contrastive Analysis Theory, this very brief review of previous studies concludes that there is more evidence against it than for it. This study intends to provide more empirical data on this issue.

This Study

For this study, only OPI Advanced speakers of English were chosen because this level is relatively well defined, compared with the Superior level which has no ceiling. The most important reason for choosing the Advanced level was its requirement that second language learners be able to "narrate and describe in major time/aspect frames" (Buck, 1989). Criticism of the OPI's focus on tense usage and verb morphology has been discussed by Magnan (1988). If such criticism is justified, then the alleged preoccupation with verb usage must reveal itself most at the Advanced level because interviewees at this level are supposed to have control over tense/aspect. Therefore, verb usage, including tense, would seem to constitute a well-defined and appropriate area of interest for this particular level.

In the following chapters, all the errors in finite verb uses in the subjects chosen will be classified and analyzed to find out whether there is significant variation by language groups within the Advanced level in the usage of finite verbs. For purposes of this study, a finite verb is, as Frank (1993) says, "a lexical verb with or without auxiliaries that acts as the full verb in the predicate" (p. 48). The reason that only finite verbs were chosen is that "finite verbs are limited by all the grammatical properties a verb may have: person, number, tense, voice, etc." (p. 48) whereas other verb forms such as infinitives, present and past participles are not, and Advanced level speakers of English, as defined in the Guidelines, should be able to control tense and aspect which are shown in finite verbs.

# CHAPTER III

# AN OVERVIEW OF VERB MORPHOLOGY AND RELATED AREAS IN CHINESE, JAPANESE, RUSSIAN, AND SPANISH

Since this study meant to examine the possible influence of first language on correctness of use of English finite verbs in the OPI interviews, this chapter summarizes verb morphology and related areas in the four languages of the testees, including: Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish.

Three of the four languages are members of three large language families. Russian, Spanish, and English belong to the Indo-European language family, each categorized under a smaller language family in the Indo-European system: Russian is a Slavonic language; Spanish is a Romance language; whereas English is labeled as a Germanic language (Comrie, 1990a). Chinese is considered to fall under the Sino-Tibetan family (Comrie, 1990a). In contrast, linguists have not been successful in assigning Japanese to a language family; however, it is clear that the language has been influenced by contact with Chinese (Shibatani, 1990).

For the purpose of this study, it is necessary to have a brief review of each of the four languages, with English as the basis for comparison, as it was the target language of the interviewees in this study. This overview will concern features related to main verb usage such as verb conjugation or inflection, markings on the verb according to person and number (and gender in certain languages), auxiliaries, word order, and lexicon, because these features will be compared with their equivalent in English when analysis of interviewees' performance is carried out later in this paper to identify any first language influence.

Chinese

Chinese is an isolating language, having very few grammatical inflectional morphemes. Chinese has no markers of tense. "The language does not employ verb affixes to indicate the relation between the time when a situation occurs and the time when that situation is mentioned in speech" (Li & Thompson, 1981). Aspect is expressed by the aid of some verbal suffixes such as le and guo (Li & Thompson, 1981; Chao, 1968; Zheng, Ma, Liu, & Yang, 1992). For example,

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| guòqù | Xiǎogāng | pàng | -le | yízhènzi, |
| in the past | | fat | perf | for a while |

'Xiaogang was fat for a while,

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| hòulaí yòu | shòu | -le. | |
| later again | thin | perf | |

but later he became thin again.' (Zheng et al., 1992)

Le does not really indicate past tense in either the first or the second half of the sentence. Instead, le has the implication of change from one state to another: from not so fat to fat, and then from fat to thin. Le can show the completion of an action in any tense, including the future. Some examples given by Li and Thompson (1981) illustrate this point very clearly:

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| míngtiān | wǒ | jiù | kāichú | -le | tā |
| tomorrow | I | then | expel | perf | 3sg |

'I'll expel him/her tomorrow.' (p. 213)

In the example above, le indicates a completed action because expelling is an action that can happen instantaneously, and le shows that the action of expelling is over; it is not a tense marker. If le were left out of the sentence, it would look like this:

míngtīan wǒ jiù kaīchú tā

tomorrow I then expel 3sg

'I'll expel him/her tomorrow.' (All the Chinese language examples not cited from other works were provided by the researcher.)

The sentence would not change its meaning and the time notion that it will happen tomorrow. The only time marker is in fact the adverbial tomorrow. Le always has the implication of an action completed in whatever tense it is used.

Guo is a suffix with an emphasis on the experiential aspect of an event. In the example,

wǒ qù -guo chángchéng

I go exp Great Wall

'I have been to the Great Wall'

guo emphasizes the experience of having seen the Great Wall. The action of going to the Great Wall happened in the past, but the focus of this sentence is on the experience, rather than on the time when that happened. Therefore, strictly speaking, there are no consistent tense markers for any particular tense in Chinese. As a result, in a lot of cases, adverbial expressions of time or location help "bound" an event (Li & Thompson, 1981, p. 201). Le and guo function more as aspect markers than as tense suffixes.

Even as aspect markers, le and guo do not mark aspect in the same way as it is marked in English because in many cases they do not mark the verb directly. For example,

wǒ chī wán -le jiù qù

I eat comp perf then go

'I'll go after I finish eating.'

In the example above, le is marking the completion complement wan instead of the main verb chi.

There is no requirement for subject-verb agreement in Chinese, regardless of person, number or tense. In other words, Chinese has no inflectional morphemes indicating number/person of the subject (Li & Thompson, 1990).

Because of lack of grammatical inflections, word order in Chinese is very important in postulating grammatical relations (Li & Thompson, 1990), just as in English. Chinese is an SVO language with extensive use of topicalization, for example,

cài wǒ mǎi -le

veggies I buy perf

'I bought some veggies.'

There are no auxiliaries in Chinese. Unlike English in which yes/no question forming is achieved by inverting the subject and the auxiliary, in Chinese the same type of question is formed by attaching a question particle ma or ne to an indicative sentence and employing a characteristic questioning intonation.

Affirmative form:

nǐ qù -guo běijīng

you go exp Beijing

'You have been to Beijing.'

Question:

nǐ qù -guo běijīng ma

you go exp Beijing Q

'Have you ever been to Beijing?'

While ma and ne are both question markers, ne also signals continuity of an action. For example,

nǐ hái zài gōngzuò ne

you still prog work Q

'Are you still working?'

The semantic implication of ne is complex. It reveals that the person who asked the question knew that the addressee had been working at some time in the past and was somewhat surprised by the fact that he was still working. Therefore, he asked this question to remind him that he had been working for a long time.

In some cases, ne also indicates choice.

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| wǒ | qù | háishì | bú | qù | ne |
| I | go | or | not | go | Q |

'Should I go or not go?'

Question-word questions are formed in Chinese by replacing non-question words with their corresponding question words, without changing their positions (Li & Thompson, 1990). Consider the following sentences:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| wǒ | qù | mǎi | dōngxi |
| I | go | buy | things |

'I'm going to buy some things.'

If we ask a question-word question about the direct object of the verb mai, the sentence becomes:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| nǐ | qù | mǎi | shénme |
| you | go | buy | what (Q) |

'What are you going to buy?'

Shenme (what) remains in the same place as dongxi (things).

There are auxiliary verbs in Chinese (Lin, 1981), but they behave rather like English modals. For example, ken (to be willing to), neng (to be able to), hui (to know how to), dasuan (to plan to). For example,

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| wǒ | huí | qí | zìxíngchē |
| I | can | ride | bicycle |

'I can ride a bicycle.'

There are no auxiliaries in Chinese similar to do in English, which only has grammatical functions, such as helping to form questions or add emphasis.

According to the theory of contrastive analysis that differences may lead to difficulties, there should be a few areas where Chinese learners of English might have problems learning English verb usage. First of all, since Chinese has no tense markers and tense is marked on the verbs in English, Chinese speakers may presumably have problems with marking tenses in English. Secondly, the Chinese way of forming yes/no questions and question-word questions is different from English, where the subject and the auxiliary have to be inverted. Chinese learners of English may thus be expected to have trouble getting the word order right when forming questions in English. A related point is that Chinese speakers of English may have trouble using English auxiliaries. Fourthly, Chinese has no subject-verb agreement requirement, whereas English has a minimal requirement for subject-verb agreement, mostly in the third person singular present simple tense form. CA may predict that the Chinese may produce errors where subject-verb agreement is required in English.

When it comes to word order, Chinese and English are both SVO languages. CA should not predict that the Chinese would not produce error in word order in English.

Japanese

The Japanese language does have a limited system of verb inflections. A chart by Shibatani (1990) illustrates very well Japanese verb inflections by conjugating C- (consonant) stem and V- (vowel) stem verbs. The following chart is a shortened version of Shibatani's, showing only forms that are related to this study.

Table 1

Japanese Verb Inflection

| | C-stem | V-stem | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 'to cut' | 'to wear (clothes)' | |
| Imperative | kir-e | ki-ro | |
| Present | kir-u | ki-ru | |
| Past | kit-ta | ki-ta | |
| Participial | kit-te | ki-te | |
| Passive | kir-are-ru | ki-rare-ru | |
| Negative | kir-ana-i | ki-na-i | (p. 867) |

As in other inflectional languages, there are some exceptions to these general paradigms. For example, the positive suffix of the progressive past tense is ita, whereas the negative suffix of the progressive past tense is inakatta (Vaccari, 1970). To be is an irregular verb that is marked in the present (desu) and in the past tense (deshita). There is and there are and their past tense forms each have three different forms used to refer to human beings, animals, and inanimate objects (Vaccari, 1970).

The basic word order in Japanese is SOV. An example offered by Shibatani (1990) looks like this:

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Taroo-ga | Hanako-ni | sono | hon-o | yatta |
| Taroo-nom | Hanako-dat | that | book-acc | gave |
| 'Taro gave that book to Hanako' | | | | (p. 870) |

One of the characteristics of an SOV language is that "auxiliaries follow the main verb; e.g. ik-itai (go-want) 'want to go', ik-eru (go can) 'can go'" (Shibatani, 1990, p.871). Another difference between Japanese and English is in the formation of yes/no questions and wh- questions. In Japanese, a yes/no question is formed by adding the particle ka at the end of a statement, unlike the English way of inverting the subject and the auxiliary; in wh- questions Japanese is also different from English in that the question word nani 'what'

stays in object position (Shibatani, 1990). In this respect, Japanese is quite similar to Chinese. Let's look at some examples.

Taroo-ga kita

Taroo-nom came

'Taroo came.'

Taroo-ga kita ka

Taroo-nom came Q

'Did Taroo come?'

Taroo-wa nani-o katta ka

Taroo-top what-acc bought Q

'What did Taroo buy?' (Shibatani, 1990)

In contrast with English but similar to Chinese, Japanese verbs do not represent number or person (Sansom, 1946; Vaccari, 1970). On the other hand, Japanese has more case markings than English does. Case particles such as ga (marks possessive to a greater degree than no), ni (means 'in,' 'to,' 'at,' 'by'), no (marks possessive), to (marks demonstrative), wo (marks objective), he (marks place), made (means 'as far as'), and yori (marks the point from which an act or a state commences) are affixed to nominals only (Sansom, 1946), whereas in English case is achieved through inflexion of pronouns, for example, he (subject), his (possessive pron.), his (possessive adj.), him (object).

Based on contrastive analysis, we would probably predict that Japanese speakers of English should not have too much trouble dealing with English tenses because tense is marked on the verb in Japanese. Unlike English, which has a limited number of cases, Japanese has an extensive number of cases, which would supposedly make it easy for Japanese speakers to learn English case system.

From our brief review of Japanese, we notice that one difference between Japanese and English lies in the word order of the two languages. CA would predict that Japanese may produce errors in word order when learning English. By the same token, Japanese may have problem putting auxiliaries in the right place in English because in Japanese auxiliaries go after the verb. Because question forming does not involve inverting the subject and the auxiliary in Japanese, whereas in English it does, Japanese ESL learners may find this difficult in English and produce errors when forming questions in English. Last, like Chinese, Japanese has no requirement for subject-verb agreement; Japanese ESL learners would probably make errors when subject-verb agreement is required in English although English does not require much agreement at all.

Spanish

Modern Spanish is an inflectional language (Green, 1990). There are two basic conjugations of verbs and nine tense forms for each regular verb, including present indicative, present subjunctive, imperfect indicative, imperative, future indicative, conditional indicative, preterit indicative, and two forms of past subjunctive (Stockwell, Bowen & Martin, 1965).

The Spanish language has very clear markings on the verb in each tense paradigm representing the person and number of the subject. For example, there are six different present forms for the verb hablar ('to have'), which are hablo, hablas, habla, hablamos, hablais, hablan, from first person singular, to third person plural (Brett & Kurz, 1942).

Like English, Spanish has auxiliaries, which are ser 'to be,' estar 'to be,' haber 'to have,' tener 'to have,' ir 'to go,' and soler (Green, 1990, p. 250). According to Green, soler is the only auxiliary by the strictest definition, that is, a verb with no lexical meaning.

One thing that differentiates Spanish from Germanic languages such as English is that Spanish has relatively free word order, which means that the subject is not fixed at a

particular point in a sentence. Modern Spanish is a consistent VO/VC (complement) language (Green, 1990). According to Green, we can basically say that spoken Spanish is an SVO/SVC language, while in "more formal registers" VSO is common (p. 254). The following example of formal Spanish given by Green shows that long subjects appear to the right of the verb.

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| han | llegado | todos los | transeuntes | de | la | Compania X |
| have(3pl) | arrived | all the | passengers | of | the | Company X |

'All passengers traveling with Company X have now arrived.' (p. 254)

An example of informal Spanish is as follows:

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| el | oficial | bebe | un | vino | delicioso |
| the | officer | drinks | a | vine | delicious |

'The officer drinks a delicious wine.' (Hugo's Spanish Simplified, p. 26)

When the lexicon is examined, we only find some loan words from English in Chinese and Japanese and a small number of cognates between Russian and English. However, we do find quite a number of cognates between Spanish and English. The reason is that English borrowed Latin words directly from the Romans and indirectly through the French and Spanish, and Spanish has Latin as its root. Recently, Spanish also borrowed a great deal from American English (Green, 1990). This two-way exchange has resulted in "a large number of equivalent forms" in Spanish and English (Stockwell, Bowen, & Martin, 1965, pp. 55-56). It is not difficult to find examples, such as these below.

| Spanish | English |
|---|---|
| admitir | admit |
| contradecir | contradict |
| encontrar | encounter |
| postponer | postpone |

(Stockwell, Bowen, & Martin, 1965, p.56)

For the same reason, it is not unusual to find that a lexical item of English is semantically and morphologically similar to one in Spanish. For example, mesa and tabla both mean table in English, and paquete in Spanish means either a packet or a carton (Stockwell, Bowen, & Martin, 1965).

However, there are also false cognates with English. For example, in most cases, the following Spanish words have the meanings listed on the right, which are not in accord with our intuition at all.

| Spanish | English |
|---|---|
| apreciar | appraise |
| intervenir | take part |
| denunciar | approve |
| conjurar | bring...under control |

(Stockwell, Bowen, & Martin, 1965, p. 275)

Unlike Chinese and Japanese learners of English, Spanish ESL learners would not find tense markings in English difficult, if CA were fundamentally sound. Auxiliaries would be another thing that Spanish speakers of English would not have much trouble with. As far as subject-verb agreement is concerned, Spanish has a much more extensive system of agreement requirements than English does. In a case like this, CA would foresee no potential for errors of Spanish speaking people learning English. Because of the large number of true cognates, Spanish speaking people may have an edge in learning English vocabulary over people who speak Chinese and Japanese languages, where there are merely some loan words from English. However, the existence of false cognates reminds us that similarity of lexical items can also be a disadvantage. CA cannot predict if and when this will happen. Spanish word order is different from English word order except in informal Spanish. This, according to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, may pose a problem to Spanish-speaking English learners.

Russian

Russian is a member of the East Slavonic group within the Indo-European family (Comrie, 1990a). It has a very complicated inflectional system, but for the purpose of this study, we will only look at Russian verbal morphology. Comrie's (1990b) chart very clearly illustrates the various morphemes indicating tense, person, number and gender.

Table 2

Russian Conjugation Types

| | | I Conjugation | II Conjugation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Infinitive | | citat' 'to read' | govorit' 'to speak' |
| Non-past: | | | |
| Singular | 1 | cita-ju | govor-ju |
| | 2 | cita-es | govor-is |
| | 3 | cita-et | govor-it |
| Plural | 1 | cita-em | govor-im |
| | 2 | cita-ete | govor-ite |
| | 3 | cita-jut | govor-jat |
| Past: | | | |
| Singular | masculine | cita-l | govor-il |
| | feminine | cita-la | govori-la |
| | neuter | cita-lo | govori-lo |
| Plural | | cita-li | govor-ili (Comrie, 1990b, p. 340) |

As we can see from Table 2, there are two conjugations in Russian (Stilman & Harkins, 1964). Russian is similar to Spanish in the sense that a verb has six endings in the present tense to represent person and number. However, in the past tense, the verb is not conjugated according to person, but agrees in gender and number with its subject. It has

three gender forms in the singular and just one form for all genders in the plural (Stilman & Harkins, 1964, p. 65).

The infrequent use of the passive in Russian is one thing that distinguishes Russian from English. With examples, Comrie (1990b) shows that in Russian there is a closer correspondence between semantic roles and grammatical relations. Russian avoids using the passive; where the subject is a natural force such as, Lightning killed the soldier or The soldier was killed by lightning, a Russian speaker would use an instrumental form such as,

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| soldata | ubilo | molniej |
| soldier | killed (3sg) | by lightning |

'It killed the soldier by lightning.'

Turning to word order in Russian, we can say that it is a free word order language as far as major constituents within the clauses are concerned (Comrie, 1990b) because the morphological markings in Russian are sufficient to make clear the grammatical relationships between different parts of a sentence.

Compared to English, Russian hardly uses auxiliary verbs in forming verb tenses. The auxiliary to be is used in the future tense only (Unbegaun, 1957). The future tense form of the verb to be is used to form the future tense of other verbs. When forming yes/no questions, Russian relies on intonation and fronting of the salient item, for example:

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| parakhod | voidyet | zavtra | v | gavan |
| ship | comes | tomorrow | in | harbor |

'Will a ship come into the harbor tomorrow?' (Unbegaun, 1957, p. 303)

Like Spanish, Russian has an extensive system of marking tense and aspect on the verb and agreement between the subject and the verb by person, number and gender, compared with English. Therefore, according to CA, Russians would not make many errors in tense and agreement in English.

On the other hand, since Russian is a free word order language while English is not, Russians may find it difficult to restrict themselves to SVO only. Passive voice may be another problem facing the Russians because of the lack of passive voice in Russian.

Summary

Our investigation reveals that the four languages are very different from each other. Because the purpose of this study is to find out the kind of influence a person's first language has on his/her second language, it might be necessary to compare relevant elements in these languages with those in English.

As far as tense/aspect markings on the verb are concerned, Japanese, Russian and Spanish seem to share some similarities with English, while Chinese seems to be the exception, having only a few aspect markers and needing to express tense by adverbials. If CA were correct, we would see the Chinese subjects in this study having more trouble with English tense markings than the subjects from the other three language groups.

When it comes to subject-verb agreement, Spanish and Russian have a much more extensive system than English, but on the other hand, Japanese and Chinese have no subject-verb agreement at all. We would expect to see a better performance in subject-verb agreement from our Spanish and Russian subjects than the Chinese and Japanese subjects based on CA.

Though similar to English, the complex verb morphology in Spanish and Russian enables them to arrange the major constituents in a sentence in a free order, which is different from the SVO word order in English. Chinese seems closer to English in word order than the other three. Japanese is different from English in that its word order is SOV. Again, CA would foresee that the Russian subjects and Japanese subjects would make more errors than the Chinese and subjects who speak Spanish, where in informal language SVO/SVC is possible.

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When we look at auxiliaries, Spanish seems to have the largest number of auxiliaries among all the languages investigated in this study. Chinese and Japanese have some modal auxiliaries, whereas Russian has the most limited number of auxiliaries. According to CA, the Chinese, Japanese and Russian subjects in this study would have more trouble using English auxiliaries than the Spanish subjects.

When we turn to lexicon, Spanish speakers learning English seem to have an advantage over those of other languages because of the cognates their language shares with English although there are some false cognates. Both Japanese and Chinese have borrowed words from Indo-European languages, particularly English, but shared lexical items with English are very few compared with Spanish. CA tells us to expect the Spanish subjects to make fewer errors than the other subjects.

The next chapter will categorize the various types of error in finite verb usage by the twenty subjects selected for this study, and the following chapters will relate the various aspects of verb usage investigated so far in each language to the types of error we will find in the twenty interviews and examine the true nature of the relationship between first language and the kinds of error in the English of ESL learners.

# CHAPTER IV

# METHOD

This study was conducted to compare types and frequencies of finite verb errors found in ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interviews with adult native speakers of Chinese, Japanese, Russian and Spanish whose oral English was rated as advanced on the OPI scale. The researcher analyzed the variation among advanced-level speakers of English in the area of tense and aspect control and mastery of other usages of finite verbs and their relationship with the speaker's background language. In other words, this paper probed for evidence for or against native language influence on finite verb usage in the Oral Proficiency Interviews. The findings on intergroup and intragroup variation would support or undermine the notion that the OPI has wide levels and thus help reject or confirm the criticism that the OPI ratings depend heavily on interviewees' grammatical accuracy.

## Subjects

The subjects for this study were twenty non-native speakers of English. All the subjects were interviewed by a certified ACTFL tester, using the Oral Proficiency Interview. The subjects chosen for this study were not interviewed for the purpose of this study; their OPI interviews merely constituted a convenient sample. Because five OPIs with advanced speakers of English whose native language was Spanish and five whose native language was Russian were available in the interviewer's pool of OPI interviews,

five was determined as the size of each group. Since there were more available Japanese and Chinese advanced speakers of English, the selection process was determined by the accessibility of interview transcriptions. Each interviewee in the study was rated by the interviewer prior to this study and re-rated by the researcher at the time of the study. The researcher's training includes a semester-long seminar in oral proficiency, taught by an ACTFL certified tester. Five speakers of English as a second language from each of the following language backgrounds were used: Chinese (N = 5), Japanese (N = 5), Russian (N = 5), and Spanish (N = 5). Information about each subject by language background is listed in Table 3.

Table 3

Background Information on All Subjects*

| Name | Sex | Native Language | Home Country | Place Interview Conducted | Time in US (Years) | Employment in Home Country | Educational Background |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bing | F | Chinese | China | US | Unknown | College teacher | Graduate student |
| Li | F | Chinese | China | China | None | None | University student in China |
| Shan | F | Chinese | China | US | 3 | College teacher | Unknown |
| Tian | M | Chinese | Taiwan | US | 8 | Unknown | Law degree |
| Wan | M | Chinese | Taiwan | US | 2.5 | Unknown | Graduate student |
| Hidenari | M | Japanese | Japan | US | 1 | Unknown | University student |
| Kaori | F | Japanese | Japan | US | 2 | Unknown | MA in TESL, pursuing doctorate |
| Maya | F | Japanese | Japan | US | Unknown | Unknown | University student |
| Reiko | F | Japanese | Japan | US | 5 | Teaching English | MA in TESL |
| Tetsunari | M | Japanese | Japan | US | Unknown | Unknown | University student |
| Boris | M | Russian | Russia | US | Unknown | Aviation engineer | College degree from home country |
| Danuta | F | Russian | Byelorussia | US | 1 | High school teacher | Unknown |
| Lara | F | Russian | Russian | US | 1 | Unknown | University student |
| Leonid | M | Russian | Russian | US | 0.5 | Unknown | College degree from home country |
| Vladimir | M | Russian | Ukraine | US | 1 | Various jobs including teaching English | Unknown |

(Continued from the previous page)

| Name | Sex | Native Language | Home Country | Place Interview Conducted | Time in US | Employment in Home Country | Educational Background |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Carmen | F | Spanish | Mexico | Mexico | None | Psychologist | Pursuing MA in home country |
| Grace | F | Spanish | Mexico | Mexico | Visited US | None | High school student |
| Maria | F | Spanish | El Salvador | US | 14 | Unknown | Unknown |
| Martin | M | Spanish | Peru | US | 1 | A Venezuelan Company | Unknown |
| Roberto | M | Spanish | Mexico | Mexico | 4 | English teacher | Pursuing MA in home country |

*Subjects' names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Materials

Cassette tapes of ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interviews were available for each of the twenty advanced subjects mentioned above. All interviews were transcribed and checked by at least one native English graduate student in addition to the researcher, and the analyses conducted in this study were based on the written transcriptions.

Transcribing was done following certain conventions set up in transcribing oral history, with modifications to meet the needs of this study. The main task of the transcriber was to type a faithful transcript of the interview, by "...typing the interview contents--all the words and transcribable sounds on the tape--just as they occur on the tape" (Davis, Back, & MacLean, 1977, p. 36). Following this principle, even when a word was not fully enunciated, the part which was said was typed out, followed by the ellipsis marks ... to show that the part typed out was not the whole word. For example, in the interview with Lara, she said, "It's a city ca...called La Dispoli." The first time she tried to say called, she only uttered ca. Therefore, ellipsis marks were put down to show the incompleteness. In order to accurately represent natural speech, contractions were typed as spoken, as advised by Baum (1977). For example, "It's great for America, it's great for you" was typed, rather than "It is great for America, it is great for you" (Boris' interview). Mispronounced words were not indicated by misspelling in order not to mislead the reader, and also because the focus of this study was not pronunciation. Should pronunciation become the focus of another study, tapes of these interviews are always available. No attempts were made to divide each turn into paragraphs because of the nature of this study. The transcriptions were punctuated mainly according to "the sense of the words as spoken" (Baum, 1977, p. 28), and each decision on which punctuation mark to use was made on the length of pause. A period indicated a longer pause than a comma. It should be made clear here that the major goal of punctuation in this study is to faithfully represent the pauses and breaks in natural speech, and the

decisions on the kind of punctuation marks to use should not affect this study because only finite verbs were examined.

All twenty interviews chosen in this study were 20 to 30 minutes long. The OPI is a face-to-face interview lasting between 10 and 30 minutes (depending on the proficiency level of the interviewee). The OPI is a structured conversation containing the following phases: warm-up, which is meant to put the interviewee at ease; level-checks, which determine the level at which the testee functions comfortably linguistically; probes, which are questions that are meant to stretch the linguistic abilities of the interviewee till he or she comes to a linguistic breakdown; and finally wind-down, when the interviewer comes back to the level comfortable for the subject and ends the interview (Dandonoli, 1987). When the speaker's highest level has been approximately determined, the interviewer probes for skills appropriate to one level above this.

Interviews are rated on a scale from Novice-low to Superior. Even though the OPI assessment criteria are included in the appendices, it is still necessary to repeat the criteria for the advanced level because variation within this level was the focus of this study. In each interview, the speaker is examined in five areas: functions, context, content, accuracy, and text type (See Appendix A). According to the guidelines, an advanced speaker should be able to describe and narrate in major time/aspect frames. His/her functioning scope should expand to some formal settings, being able to deal with topics not only of personal but also of public interest. He/she should also be able to talk in paragraph-length discourse and be understood without difficulty by speakers unaccustomed to non-native speakers.

## Procedures

Because of the particular structure of the Oral Proficiency Interview, involving a warm-up phase at the beginning and a wind-down toward the end, it was decided that the

middle part of each interview would be most representative of the subject's real ability. Therefore, the first and last ten conversation turns of each interview were not considered in this study. However, that left different numbers of turns and each turn was of a different length. In order to control the length of the body of data in the interviews, the researcher counted the number of words in the section examined in each interview and obtained a total number of words constituting the body of data in each interview as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Number of Words and Number of Turns Examined in Each Interview

| Subject Name | No. of Words | No. of Turns |
|---|---|---|
| Bing | 2,359 | 57 |
| Li | 1,593 | 57 |
| Shan | 1,582 | 59 |
| Tian | 2,072 | 65 |
| Wan | 1,654 | 79 |
| Hidenari | 2,782 | 76 |
| Kaori | 2,313 | 44 |
| Maya | 2,230 | 105 |
| Reiko | 1,839 | 29 |
| Tetsunari | 1,291 | 68 |
| Boris | 2,069 | 37 |
| Danuta | 2,297 | 66 |
| Lara | 1,915 | 34 |
| Leonid | 1,810 | 61 |
| Vladimir | 2,458 | 71 |
| Carmen | 1,339 | 65 |
| Grace | 2,692 | 79 |
| Maria | 3,284 | 54 |
| Martin | 2,393 | 95 |
| Roberto | 2,411 | 91 |

From the number of words, the frequency of each category of error (as categorized later in this chapter) in the section was determined, and the frequency of error per 1,000 words was calculated. These findings are presented in the Results section. This way the length of the body of data in each interview should be equalized, eliminating one variable which could conceivably have affected the results.

Characterization of finite verb errors.

All the finite verbs in the transcript were examined for finite verb errors. The definition for finite verbs used in this study was taken from Frank (1993). "A finite verb refers to a lexical verb, with or without auxiliaries, that acts as the full verb in the predicate. It is limited by all the grammatical properties a verb may have: person, number, tense, voice, etc." (p. 48). For example, in the following sentence New information about the universe will be discovered by scientists in the twenty-first century (Azar, 1994, p. 224), will be discovered is the finite verb. Will carries the future tense; be helps form the passive voice; and discovered is the past participle of discover. In The book is really interesting (p. 236), is carries present tense and person and number, which in this case is third person singular.

Errors were identified in these interviews, following the basic principle of minimal change. In other words, when errors were found, efforts were made to determine what the speaker should have said by choosing a grammatically acceptable and appropriate form of the utterance which was as close to it as possible. Had the utterance been corrected, the smallest possible changes would have been made, without changing the meaning. The error classifications were based on Dulay, Burt, and Krashen's (1982) taxonomies but were expanded in some categories and simplified in some other categories to exhaust all types of error discovered in this study. For example, agreement of subject and verb is further subcoded into "disagreement of subject and verb person," "disagreement of subject

and number," and "disagreement of subject and tense" (p. 149). However, in the present study, the first two subcategories were merged into subject-verb disagreement problems, while the third one was labeled as a tense problem. As far as omission of verb is concerned, Dulay et al specify two types of error, one for the copula and the other for other verbs as in He (fell?) in the water and omission of to be as in He in the water (p. 149). In the current study, the first problem did not exist, and the second type of error was given a different name: finite verb absent.

Ten types of error were discovered and categorized: 1) auxiliary problems, 2) absence of finite verb, 3) conditional problems, 4) verb-preposition problems, 5) voice problems, 6) form problems, 7) lexical verb problems, 8) word order problems, 9) disagreement problems, 10) tense/aspect problems. Further details about the different kinds of error are given below.

Because of the probable overlap of the ten categories, it was possible that one finite verb slot would involve two types of error, despite the researcher's efforts to make as few changes as possible (Magnan, 1988). For example, when narrating personal experience in the past, a Russian subject made the comments shown in the following example:

> Leonid: My, my parents used to speak Yiddish only they want to me to don't understand what are they talking about so...

The underlined part was marked as an error in both word order and tense. According to the context, the interviewee was trying to say that his parents only spoke Yiddish when they did not want him to understand, and that was the reason why he never learned a word of Yiddish. Because he was narrating a personal experience that had happened to him, the past tense should have been used instead of the present tense. Moreover, the subject and the auxiliary are in the noun clause what are they talking about are not in the normal order as in a statement. As a result, this finite verb slot was analyzed as containing one instance of error in tense and one instance of error in word order.

A very important rule followed in examining finite verb usage was that "the benefit of the doubt always went to" the subject (Magnan, 1988, p.270). This was employed when an utterance was not actually wrong, but yet not ideal. This was illustrated in Wan's comments in the example below when he was talking about the unification of Taiwan and mainland China.

Wan: We all agree we should become one country, but due to lots of difference in ideology, it's hard to combine as one now just like Eastern, Western Germany.

A more suitable and idiomatic form would be it would be rather than it's, but since what he said is not totally wrong, this was not marked as an error.

Following these classifications and principles, the researcher analyzed all twenty transcripts, defining the problems in each finite verb slot.

1. Auxiliary Problems (AP)

Errors that fell under the category of auxiliary problems can be classified into three major types: (a) unnecessary auxiliary, (b) wrong auxiliary, and (c) missing auxiliary. Unnecessary auxiliaries are those that are not needed before a finite verb. Example AP1 illustrates this.

AP1. Boris: Because all over America the same rules. They are differ a little bit from one state to another, but the ideas, they're the same.

The auxiliary are is not needed; differ itself is sufficient in this case. Another similar example appeared in Leonid's interview:

AP2. Leonid: ...it's very difficult to, for a couple from different culture to understand each other. And my parents would also don't understand to me and my child. I guess after a few years I'll marry someone from Russia because it's really difficult to, to

understand native Americans.

Do is extra because of the presence of another auxiliary would in the same sentence. The correct verb form in the sentence should be, "And my parents would also not understand to me and my child." An error of a similar nature was also found in Tian's interview.

AP3. Tian: So if all the neighbors are very prosperous, then there, the problems won't be happen.

Here the extra auxiliary be took on its infinitive form because of the auxiliary preceding it, but it is still an unwanted auxiliary.

The second problem relating to the usage of auxiliaries is choosing a wrong auxiliary when one is required. An example from Kaori's interview illustrates this type of error.

AP4. Kaori: But that's not mean that they will not accept anyone from outside, period.

Is was used in place of does which is the correct auxiliary to use in this place. Only completely wrong auxiliaries as the one in AP4 are included in this category, not including any auxiliary which disagrees with the subject in person or number or is in the wrong tense form, which will be discussed later under other types of error. In some other cases, instead of an auxiliary, a lexical verb was used as in example AP5.

AP5. Interviewer: But you think it's better that they broke up?

Leonid: Yes, I think.

There were also cases, however, where auxiliaries were completely left out. An example occurs in Shan's interview when she compared life in the United States with life in China:

AP6. Shan: Here it's better for the uh uh for children, because they have the rich home, er, well, they grow up uhh you know a lot of pressure ___ waiting for them, so they should have a happy, I mean, happy childhood.

The underlined blank should be filled with the auxiliary is. A similar example was found in Roberto's interview where he left out the auxiliary, but changed the form of the finite verb anyway.

AP7. Roberto: No, I ne...I ___ never been there.

A slightly different example can be found in Danuta's interview:

AP8. Danuta: At first time they ___ not really told, but they didn't write it was because of Chernobyl.

The auxiliary did was missing, and as a result the finite told was not changed into its infinitive form, as it would be if the sentence were grammatically correct, "They did not really tell."

All of the preceding errors were categorized together as auxiliary problems.

2. Finite Verb Absent (FV)

When an auxiliary is absent, only part of the finite verb phrase is missing. However, in some cases, the whole finite verb phrase is missing, with no trace of a verb at all. In Maya's interview, she dropped the finite verb in the following utterance:

FV1. Maya: I think Japanese much American American people ___ much concerned about that.

The verb are was not present although required because concerned is functioning as a participial adjective, showing a state, and therefore requires a linking verb between itself and the subject of the sentence. The same problem was also discovered in Danuta's interview:

FV2. Danuta: ...they ___ sick every, everyone, everyone, everyone.

The verb got (This was narrated in the past tense.) was missing, leaving the whole sentence verbless.

Grace left out the main verb is in the independent clause. The fact that the finite verb is is present in the embedded noun clause makes it harder to detect the absence of a finite verb in the main clause.

FV3. Grace: But one thing ___ that my lit...my little sister is gonna be in the American school, so my father preferred for us both to stay there.

The fact that is is used in the dependent clause, that my lit...my little sister is gonna be in the American school, is deceptive in that one may think that it is the verb in the independent clause.

3. Conditional Problems (CP)

Quite a number of errors were found under the category of untrue conditionals. This is different in some ways from the other categories because it is not a form error per se, but concerns appropriateness of usage. Since this study tries to cover all the inappropriateness which happens in the finite verb slot and therefore reflect an accurate picture of the testees' competence in finite verb usage, conditional problems were not left out merely because they are slightly different from the others. In many cases, untrue conditionals were not used when they should have been. A good example is from Tian's interview, where Tian and the interviewer were hypothesizing about an untrue situation for Tian, in which he imagined that he was a successful businessman in Hong Kong with the opportunity to leave and start a new life in Vancouver before 1997, when Hong Kong will be returned to China:

CP1. Interviewer: But if you go to a new place, in a way don't you lose a lot because you've lost your culture and your friends and your associates?

Tian: Oh, yeah. That's a good point. I have to study from zero. That's a good point. Yeah. Right. I had to come...

Since they were talking about an imagined situation, the correct form should be "I would have to study from zero...I would have to come..." We could argue that Tian himself was in a new situation, removed from his own culture and people and therefore it was justifiable not to use untrue conditionals. However, if we take a closer look at the context, he was, as a matter of fact, putting himself in a Hong Kong person's situation.

Maria made the same kind of error when talking about crime in California:

CP2. Maria: I wish everything change like it used to be...

Change should be in its untrue conditional form, that is, would change because of the nature of wish used in the independent clause.

In some cases, though, an effort was made on the part of the interviewee to use untrue conditionals, but the form was incorrect, as in the following example:

CP4. Grace: Oh, so if I would have gone to the Tech, I would have gone to the section where speak ah where English is spoken...

The correct way of saying it is "If I had gone to the Tech, I would have gone to...." The interviewee here knew that this was an untrue condition but confused the form. The flip side of the coin could be that native speakers might also do the same thing. Although the very top of the OPI rating scale is the "educated native speaker" (Liskin-Gasparro, 1987b), a native speaker may not automatically be rated as a superior on the OPI (G. Halleck, personal communication, February 1, 1995).

Both errors in appropriate usage and form were counted as conditional problems.

4. Verb-preposition Problems (VPP)

A lot of mistakes were found in verb-preposition combinations, which are also known as "two-part verbs," "two-word verbs," "composite verbs," or "phrasal verbs" (Frank, 1993, p. 174). Two major problems found in the interviews which fall under this

category were the absence of prepositions and the use of the wrong prepositions. The first example in this category is from Boris' interview:

VPP1. Boris: And America takes a good care about newcomers.

The correct phrasal verb here should be takes good care of. The change of of to about rendered the sentence unidiomatic, even though the sense is perfectly understandable. For example, the following utterance from Hidenari's interview was also counted as a verb-preposition mistake.

VPP3. Hidenari: If I continue to go to graduate school to major ___ linguistics, probably I'll be suffer I'll be suffered because of my poor English.

After the verb major, the preposition in was missing.

VPP4. Shan: He's living in San Francisco, and he he brought us here, helped my husband find a job in LA, so we came ___ LA.

Because to was missing after came, it was counted as an error under this category. In addition to missing prepositions, an incorrect preposition was used by a few subjects. An example is found in Shan's interview.

VPP5. Shan: I went in a girls' school, all girls.

Went in should have been changed to went to.

5. Voice Problems

Choosing the right voice of a verb seemed to create a lot of difficulties for quite a few of the interviewees. Let's look at a sentence by Hidenari referred to earlier in this study.

VP1. Hidenari: If I continue to go to graduate school to major linguistics, probably I'll be suffer I'll be suffered because of my poor English.

Here passive voice of the verb suffer was used whereas active voice would have been a better choice. Thus, it would have been better for him to say, "...I'll suffer because of my poor English."

An opposite example would be one where the active voice was used where in fact the passive voice would have been more appropriate, as illustrated by the following utterance.

VP2. Maria: I believe, I believe each one suppose to fix their own problem.

The correct form for suppose should be is supposed. Hence, the whole sentence would have become "I believe each one is supposed to fix their own problem."

6. Form Problems (FP)

Verb forms in English have always been a challenge to ESL/EFL learners, especially to those who come from a language background where each verb only has one form. It has been noted by the researcher, however, that a wrong form of a verb was often chosen in place of the correct one. One example occurred when Maria complained about the O. J. Simpson case:

FP1. Maria: I mean what I heard, what I know is that every time they go to court, they just spending, you see they have to get paid, these people have to be paid. And they taking the taxes to pay all these things. That's what I don't like.

In these two cases, we could argue that the auxiliary are was left out for some reason. However, this was counted as a verb form problem because the interviewee was presenting general statements of fact; therefore, simple present should be the right tense to use (Azar, 1992).

A more clear-cut example comes from another interview.

FP2. Shan: I like reading, sometimes watch TV, uhh but, you know, a lot of

housework have to do, so I cooking, sewing, you know I have to do some, you know gardening, some water, watering the uh lawn.

Here the subject was describing things that she does every day, and therefore there is no justification for her to use the present continuous tense rather than the simple present. One plausible explanation for this is that she simply chose the wrong form of the verbs, effectively eliminating the possibility of leaving out the auxiliary am. The following example falls under the same category of error but is different enough to merit discussion.

FP3. Bing: I prefer the Chinese style. Everything is not speak out, and and and you have to, to deeply understand this, and then to appreciate it.

The interviewee was making an effort to use the passive voice, and yet the verb speak is not in its appropriate form, which should be spoken, therefore resulting in a grammatical error. This was not counted as a voice problem because the interviewee seemed to be trying to employ the passive voice but fell short by making an error on the form of the verb speak. Had it been counted as a voice form problem, too much credit would have been taken away from the interviewee. We could argue that if the auxiliary does were used instead of is, it would also make the sentence grammatically correct, but a sentence like that would not make much sense. A combination of acceptable syntax and sense was always the guiding principle in this study.

7. Lexical Verb Problems (LP)

Reviewing the transcripts of these interviews revealed another problem shared by over half of the subjects, that is, choosing incorrect verbs or verbal expressions. A simple but illustrative example can be found in Lara's interview.

LP1. Lara: And sure a lot of people they are looking for dollars, and if you're coming from another country, you have dollar you can be robbed, robbed? Yeah, you can be...I don't know, violented, or something

can happen.

The interviewee used violent as a verb and employed it as a past participle even though it is not really difficult for the listener to figure out that she was saying that a foreigner with money can be attacked simply through the meaning of violent. Simple, common words can also cause some confusion as shown in the following example.

LP2. Li: The most benefit I want to go is from the, the condition of study, and for I was learning English, I'm learning English, so I want to be in the English environment, speaking environment, so I could learn better English.

Go and get are so close in form the interviewee took one for the other and ended up with "the most benefit I want to go," which does not make sense. Another possible explanation might be that the interviewee was thinking about going overseas and therefore used the verb go.

In a number of cases, the interviewee just did not have or could not find the right words for the ideas he wanted to express. In Boris' interview, he was talking about changes in Russia.

LP3. Boris: Democracy raised, you know, and Communist government failed, but process itself, it's very painful, you know. What about un conscience, what about freedoms, what about free market, free entertainment? It's raised now. It's...

The two cases of raised were used wrongly. With the first one Boris probably meant succeeded or came about, and in the second example, he probably meant improved.

Verb choices referred to the lexical finite verb chosen for each possible place where a finite verb was required. Thus, verb choice addressed whether the interviewee had used the right word in the verb slot. Because no syntactical considerations were made in counting incorrect verb choices, the correct verb choices were obtained by subtracting the number of wrong choices from the total number of finite verb slots.

8. Word Order Problems (OP)

Word order in relation to the finite verb in a sentence also seemed to present some problems for some of the subjects included in this study. A typical place for this kind of error is in embedded questions, as in the following example from Leonid's interview:

OP1. Leonid: Er, er it's, it's a difficult question because I'm not sure what are you asking about.

Most of the word order problems happened in embedded questions. A very similar example can be obtained in Martin's interview:

OP2. Martin: I don't know how can I explain this.

The correct version would be, "I don't know how I can explain this."

9. Disagreement Problems (DP)

Compared with the types of error mentioned above, subject-verb disagreement is a more common problem among these subjects. Let's take a look at a sentence by Tetsunari:

DP1. Tetsunari: So people, people wants to, wants to go there.

Because the subject people is third person plural, the finite verb want should agree with it in number by dropping the suffix s. Thus, the sentence should have been, "So people, people want to go there."

A problem of the same nature was found in Danuta's interview.

DP2. Danuta: Zhirinovski want to get back Alaska from United, from the US, you know it.

The subject Zhirinovski is a case of third person singular, and therefore want should agree with it by taking suffix s.

Only verb slots where subject-verb agreement could pose a problem were examined. Verb slots that met those requirements included all present tense verb slots and occurrences of past tense of the to be auxiliary, for which one of two forms must be chosen. There were occasions where a speaker used the form of auxiliary or verb consistent with the subject of the verb, but made an error in the choice of tense. Although the verb phrase was internally consistent, this kind of error was classified as a tense error because it was inappropriate to the setting of the discourse.

10. Tense/Aspect Problems (TA)

The last, but by no means least, serious error discovered is the problem of inappropriate use of tense, which includes aspect in this study. No formal distinction between tense and aspect was made for the purposes of this investigation, in accordance with the ACTFL OPI Guidelines, which simply express the requirement of the ability to "describe and narrate in major time/aspect frames" (Buck, 1989) at the advanced level. A problem which concerns purely tense can be represented by the following utterance by Vladimir:

TA1. Vladimir: No, I did not live in Ukraine when Chernobyl happened. I live in Georgia then because I was born in Georgia.

The verb live should be in the past tense. In answering a question eliciting past tense narration, Roberto also used the wrong tense.

TA2. Roberto: Last weekend. Well, um I stay home, preparing, reading the material for the next class.

As in the previous example, Roberto used present instead of past tense.

An underuse of past tense is only part of the problem, as some subjects overused past tense.

TA3. Interviewer: Do you use internet here?

Wan: Yes, I did. I have modem. So I play that kind of stuff.

Apparently, the interviewee uses the internet very often, so if that is true, then did should actually be in the present tense.

Because errors in use of aspect occurred only very occasionally, aspect problems were placed in the same category as tense. Thus the underlined portion in the following conversation was classified as a tense error.

TA4. Interviewer: What do your parents do now?

Li: You know, you say about Beijing? Now my mother has retired...

Here Li's question for clarification sounds odd because it was not idiomatic and also because it was not really addressing the interviewer's question. Since the question was just asked, it would probably have been better if she had said, "You are talking about Beijing?" The problem here was more than an aspect problem. The word say was not the best choice in this situation, either.

During the counting of correct tense/aspect slots, places where tense/aspect should have been marked but was not, were not counted. For example, a missing auxiliary verb would force a present participle to effectively function as a full verb, resulting in no indication of tense or aspect as in FP1 and FP2 mentioned earlier under Form Problems.

FP1. Maria: I mean what I heard, what I know is that every time they go to court, they just spending, you see they have to get paid, these people have to be paid. And they taking the taxes to pay all these things. That's what I don't like.

FP2. Shan: I like reading, sometimes watch TV, uhh but, you know, a lot of housework have to do, so I cooking, sewing, you know I have to do some, you know gardening, some water, watering the uh lawn.

In FP1 and FP2, the underlined words were counted as instances of using the wrong form of a verb rather than tense/aspect problems. We could argue a case of missing auxiliary

are in FP1, but since only one label should be chosen to be fair to the subject, form was chosen rather than the omission of an auxiliary. This was determined to be an either-or situation where the subject could not possibly be making two kinds of error by using the progressive form. This opinion was backed up by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) in their categorization of the substitution of the progressive for the simple past: Then the man shooting (shot?) with a gun (p. 149).

Clearly, the identification of the exact nature of the error depended on the surrounding text and general nature of the discourse; the guiding principle was to compare what the subject said with what a native speaker would have said, under the same circumstances. A very obvious example would be when the finite verb was missing as in FV1, FV2, and FV3.

FV1. Maya: I think Japanese much American American people ___ much concerned about that.

FV2. Danuta: ...they ___ sick every, everyone, everyone, everyone.

FV3. Grace: But one thing ___ that my lit...my little sister is gonna be in the American school, so my father preferred for us both to stay there.

Since the finite verb which is supposed to carry tense was missing in each case, these blank spaces were not counted as tense/aspect problems. Rather, they were treated as absence of finite verbs.

Correctly and Incorrectly Filled Finite Verb Slots.

This is not a category of error. Rather it is a tally of all correct and incorrect verb slots, incorrect for any of the reasons above. The frequencies of correctly and incorrectly filled finite verb slots will be processed with Pearson chi-square tests by language group in the next chapter.

A verb slot is a place in an English sentence which should be filled by a finite verb. This definition was created by the researcher for the purpose of this study and cross checked with some native speakers of English with a linguistics background. In this analysis, frequencies of each error type were added up, resulting in the total number of incorrect verb slots for each subject, and then the totals for the five subjects in each language group were tallied to obtain the total for the whole group. Therefore, because of the overlap of the error categories, the total number of correct verb slots and errors for each group is larger than the total number of finite verb slots. That is, a given verb slot may show more than one error at the same time. The analysis was carried out this way to more accurately represent the linguistic competence of each subject, making a distinction between one and two or more errors in a single verb slot.

Statistical analysis

Because all the data in this study were analyzed in terms of pure frequencies, the Pearson chi-square test was the only statistical procedure employed. However, because the chi-square test requires each cell of data to be bigger than 5, and the frequencies for certain categories were too small to run the test and obtain dependable statistical results, the Pearson chi-square test was only applied in treating the correct and erroneous frequencies for the following areas: (a) correctly and incorrectly filled verb slots (correctly filled verb slots are finite verbs free of error whereas incorrectly filled verb slots are finite verb slots marred with one or more of the types of error analyzed in this study), (b) tense/aspect, (c) subject-verb agreement, (d) auxiliaries, and (e) finite verb choice. The frequencies of error in each of the types for which the chi-square test was not run contributed to (a) where the overall use of finite verbs was investigated.

The next chapter is a report of all the statistical results obtained by applying the Pearson chi-square test to the data in the five categories mentioned above.

# CHAPTER V

# RESULTS

This chapter presents the data for the statistical analysis of the five types of error mentioned at the end of the method section. Because the data set involved in this study is comparatively small, individual variation is important. Thus, raw frequencies and percentages of each type of error in finite verbs by individual are also displayed in this chapter. This study assumed that there should not be significant differences between advanced speakers of English rated by the OPI test in terms of correct English tense/aspect usage, regardless of their language background. However, if there are significant differences between language groups, can their errors in English be related to their first language as the contrastive study of the first and target languages might suggest? If CA alone is not sufficient to explain the nature of the errors, at what other factors should we look? Finally, and most importantly, what would the differences tell us about the OPI test and the nature of OPI ratings? This chapter is only a presentation of the statistical results, the answers to the results will be given in the discussion.

The Pearson chi-square test was run to determine the existence of any significant differences in various aspects of finite verb use because chi-square tests are used to show whether there is significant evidence of association between two factors (Butler, 1985).

We will start with correctly and incorrectly filled verb slots because this category includes every type of error described in Chapter IV. Table 5 demonstrates frequencies of correctly filled and incorrectly filled verb slots by language group and the statistical results generated by running the Pearson chi-square test.

Table 5

Frequencies of Correctly and Incorrectly Filled Verb Slots by Language Group

| Verb Group | Correct | Incorrect | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Chinese | 563 | 155 | 718 |
| Japanese | 596 | 85 | 681 |
| Russian | 646 | 109 | 755 |
| Spanish | 637 | 72 | 709 |

Pearson chi-square value: 41.547; $p = 0.000$ ($< 0.05$)

Since $X^2 = 41.547$, with a p of 0.000, which is smaller than 0.05, there is a significant relationship between language background and the proportion of errors made in using finite verbs. However, in order to more easily determine which language group or groups made the most errors, we had to find the percentages of correct and incorrect usages for each group. The calculated percentages can be found in Table 6.

Table 6

Percentages of Correctly and Incorrectly Filled Verb Slots by Language Group

| Verb Group | Correct | Incorrect | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Chinese | 78.41 | 21.59 | 100.00 |
| Russian | 85.56 | 14.44 | 100.00 |
| Japanese | 87.52 | 12.48 | 100.00 |
| Spanish | 89.84 | 10.16 | 100.00 |

The four groups are arranged by percentage of errors, from the highest to the lowest. In this case, the Chinese produced the highest percentage of errors, and the Spanish the lowest, with Russians and Japanese falling in between.

Because of the limited size of the samples in this study, it was deemed necessary to show individual performance in each group. In order to detail individual variation within groups, the raw frequencies and percentages for each language group are displayed in Tables 7 through 10.

Table 7 reveals variation among the Chinese subjects.

Table 7

Frequencies and Percentages of Correctly and Incorrectly Filled Finite Verb Slots in the Chinese Subjects

| Verb Name | Correct Frequency | Incorrect Frequency | Correct Percentage | Incorrect Percentage | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Wan | 118 | 42 | 73.75 | 26.25 | 100.00 |
| Bing | 108 | 35 | 75.52 | 24.48 | 100.00 |
| Shan | 119 | 30 | 79.87 | 20.13 | 100.00 |
| Li | 112 | 26 | 81.16 | 18.84 | 100.00 |
| Tian | 106 | 22 | 82.81 | 17.19 | 100.00 |
| Total | 563 | 155 | ----- | ----- | ----- |

The Chinese subject data in the table above are arranged by percentage of errors, from the highest to the lowest. Wan has the highest number of errors while Tian has the lowest. The range within this group is 9.06 % (26.25 % - 17.19 %), which shows a certain degree of variation within the group.

The next table deals with data from the Russian group by individual.

Table 8

Frequencies and Percentages of Correctly and Incorrectly Filled Finite Verb Slots in the Russian Subjects

| Verb Name | Correct Verb | Incorrect Verb | Correct Percentage | Incorrect Percentage | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lara | 111 | 30 | 78.72 | 21.28 | 100.00 |
| Danuta | 123 | 24 | 83.67 | 16.33 | 100.00 |
| Boris | 126 | 23 | 84.56 | 15.44 | 100.00 |
| Leonid | 127 | 23 | 84.67 | 15.33 | 100.00 |
| Vladimir | 159 | 9 | 94.64 | 5.36 | 100.00 |
| Total | 646 | 109 | ----- | ----- | ----- |

In the table above, as the Russian subjects go from the bottom to the top, the percentage of errors increases. The range in the percentage of incorrect usage is 15.92 in this group, bigger than that in the Chinese group.

Table 9 presents the same data on the Japanese subjects.

Table 9

Frequencies and Percentages of Correctly Filled and Incorrectly Filled Finite Verbs in the Japanese Subjects

| Verb Name | Correct Verb | Incorrect Verb | Correct Percentage | Incorrect Percentage | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tetsunari | 112 | 23 | 82.96 | 17.04 | 100.00 |
| Maya | 108 | 22 | 83.08 | 16.92 | 100.00 |
| Hidenari | 102 | 18 | 85.00 | 15.00 | 100.00 |
| Kaori | 141 | 15 | 90.38 | 9.62 | 100.00 |
| Reiko | 133 | 7 | 95.00 | 5.00 | 100.00 |
| Total | 596 | 85 | ----- | ----- | ----- |

The Japanese subjects were arranged by proportion of errors, from the highest to the lowest. Tetsunari (17.04 %) is at the top and Reiko (5.00 %) at the bottom, making a range of 12.04 %, which is bigger than the range in the Chinese group, but smaller than the Russian group.

Table 10 shows related data on the Spanish subjects.

Table 10

Frequencies and Percentages of Correctly and Incorrectly Filled Finite Verb Slots in the Spanish Subjects

| Verb Name | Correct Verb | Incorrect Verb | Correct Percentage | Incorrect Percentage | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Maria | 136 | 21 | 86.62 | 13.38 | 100.00 |
| Carmen | 122 | 16 | 88.41 | 11.59 | 100.00 |
| Martin | 115 | 14 | 89.15 | 10.85 | 100.00 |
| Roberto | 133 | 11 | 92.36 | 7.64 | 100.00 |
| Grace | 131 | 10 | 92.91 | 7.09 | 100.00 |
| Total | 637 | 72 | ----- | ----- | ----- |

This table is arranged in the same way as the tables of percentages for the other three groups. The percentages of incorrect usage reveal a range of 6.29, which is the smallest among all four groups.

Tables 5 through 10 give us an overall statistical report of the subjects' performance on finite verb usage in general. Results for correctly and incorrectly filled verb slots show that the rankings by group from the worst to the best are Chinese, Russians, Japanese, and Spanish.

Efforts were also made to explore the subjects' abilities to use English tense/aspect as this is a specific requirement in the OPI assessment guidelines. Pearson chi-square tests were run for the frequencies of correct and incorrect tense/aspect use for each language group.

Table 11

Frequencies of Correct and Incorrect Tense/Aspect Use by Language Group

| Frequency Group | Correct Tense/Aspect Use | Incorrect Tense/Aspect Use | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Chinese | 631 | 64 | 695 |
| Japanese | 638 | 35 | 673 |
| Russian | 688 | 52 | 740 |
| Spanish | 666 | 30 | 696 |

Pearson chi-square value: 16.184; $p = 0.001$ ($< 0.05$)

Because the data in each cell are independent measures of frequency, a two-way chi-square test was run to determine if there is a relationship between language background and the proportion of correct and incorrect tense uses. $X^2$ equals 16.184, with a probability level of 0.001, less than the critical probability 0.05. Therefore, the results are significant, suggesting there is a relationship between first language and the usage of correct or incorrect tense.

However, Table 11 does not directly tell us which language group or groups did better on the use of tenses in English. In order to find out, the percentages of the correct and incorrect tense uses for each language group were calculated by the chi-square program as shown in Table 12.

Table 12

Percentages of Correct and Incorrect Tense/Aspect Use by Language Group

| Percentage Group | Correct Tense/Aspect | Incorrect Tense/Aspect | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Chinese | 90.79 | 9.21 | 100.00 |
| Russian | 92.97 | 7.03 | 100.00 |
| Japanese | 94.80 | 5.20 | 100.00 |
| Spanish | 95.69 | 4.31 | 100.00 |

As we did earlier in this chapter, the language groups are arranged in descending order of incorrect tense/aspect use. Table 12 shows very clearly that the Chinese made the highest percentage of tense errors of the four language groups, and the Spanish the lowest, with the Russians and Japanese in between.

Percentages of the correct and incorrect frequencies of tense/aspect usage for each subject were also calculated and shown. Intragroup variation was greater for some groups than others, as indicated in Tables 13 through 16.

Table 13

Frequencies and Percentages of Correct and Incorrect Tense/Aspect (T/A) Use in the Chinese Subjects

| T/A Name | Correct Frequency | Incorrect Frequency | Correct Percentage | Incorrect Percentage | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Wan | 132 | 19 | 87.42 | 12.58 | 100.00 |
| Li | 118 | 16 | 88.06 | 11.94 | 100.00 |
| Bing | 127 | 13 | 90.71 | 9.29 | 100.00 |
| Shan | 133 | 11 | 92.36 | 7.64 | 100.00 |
| Tian | 121 | 5 | 96.03 | 3.97 | 100.00 |
| Total | 631 | 64 | ----- | ----- | ----- |

In Table 13, the results for the Chinese subjects are arranged in descending order of incorrect tense/aspect use. The highest percentage of incorrect responses, 12.58, was obtained by Wan, and the lowest, 3.97, was obtained by Tian. The range is, therefore, 8.61.

In Table 14, data concerning tense/aspect use of the Russian subjects are treated in the same way as in Table 13.

Table 14

Frequencies and Percentages of Correct and Incorrect Tense/Aspect (T/A) Use in the Russian Subjects

| T/A Name | Correct Frequency | Incorrect Frequency | Correct Percentage | Incorrect Percentage | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Danuta | 132 | 13 | 91.03 | 8.97 | 100.00 |
| Lara | 122 | 12 | 91.04 | 8.96 | 100.00 |
| Leonid | 135 | 12 | 91.84 | 8.16 | 100.00 |
| Boris | 137 | 9 | 93.84 | 6.16 | 100.00 |
| Vladimir | 162 | 6 | 96.43 | 3.57 | 100.00 |
| Total | 688 | 52 | ----- | ----- | ----- |

Consistent with the previous tables, the Russian subjects are arranged in descending order of incorrect tense/aspect use. Danuta emerged as having the most errors, and Vladimir the lowest number. However, the range (5.40 %) in this group is not as great as that in the previous Chinese group.

Table 15 shows the performance of each individual in the Japanese group in terms of tense/aspect use.

Table 15

Frequencies and Percentages of Correct and Incorrect Tense/Aspect (T/A) Use in the Japanese Subjects

| T/A Name | Correct Frequency | Incorrect Frequency | Correct Percentage | Incorrect Percentage | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tetsunari | 120 | 13 | 90.23 | 9.77 | 100.00 |
| Maya | 118 | 9 | 92.91 | 7.09 | 100.00 |
| Hidenari | 112 | 7 | 94.12 | 5.88 | 100.00 |
| Kaori | 153 | 4 | 97.45 | 2.55 | 100.00 |
| Reiko | 135 | 2 | 98.54 | 1.46 | 100.00 |
| Total | 638 | 35 | | | |

The Japanese subjects are arranged in descending order of incorrect tense/aspect use from top to bottom. The highest percentage of error is 9.77, whereas the lowest is 1.46; the difference of 8.31 % is almost as large as the range within the Chinese group and greater than the Russian group.

Table 16 shows the performance of each individual in the Spanish group in terms of tense/aspect use.

Table 16

Frequencies and Percentages of Correct and Incorrect Tense/Aspect (T/A) Use in the Spanish Subjects

| T/A Name | Correct Frequency | Incorrect Frequency | Correct Percentage | Incorrect Percentage | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Carmen | 128 | 8 | 94.12 | 5.88 | 100.00 |
| Maria | 144 | 8 | 94.74 | 5.26 | 100.00 |
| Martin | 122 | 5 | 96.06 | 3.94 | 100.00 |
| Roberto | 137 | 5 | 96.48 | 3.52 | 100.00 |
| Grace | 135 | 4 | 97.12 | 2.88 | 100.00 |
| Total | 666 | 30 | ----- | ----- | ----- |

The Spanish subjects were again arranged in ascending order of incorrect tense/aspect use. This table shows even less individual variation than the Russians because the range is only 3 % (5.88 % - 2.88 %). The percentage of tense/aspect errors for each individual in the group is very close to the average percentage of tense/aspect errors for the whole group. Thus, among the four language background groups, the group average for the Spanish speakers must be the most representative of the individual members.

The range in the Spanish group is the smallest of all, and that in the Chinese group the greatest of all. In the other two groups, the range in the Japanese group is bigger than that in the Russian group. As we can see, the rankings of the four language groups in tense/aspect remain the same as in correct and incorrect verb slots.

Another category of error which occurs often enough in these interviews for the researcher to run Pearson chi-square tests is subject-verb disagreement. To determine if there was a significant relationship between language background and the frequencies of subject-verb disagreement, a Pearson chi-square test was run for the frequencies in Table 17.

Table 17

Frequencies of Subject-Verb Agreement and Disagreement by Language Group

| Subject-Verb Group | Agreement | Disagreement | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Chinese | 484 | 25 | 509 |
| Japanese | 469 | 11 | 480 |
| Russian | 508 | 18 | 526 |
| Spanish | 556 | 10 | 566 |

Pearson chi-square value: 10.210; $p = 0.017$ ($< 0.05$)

$X^2$ equals 10.210, and p is smaller than 0.05, so there is a significant association between language background and frequencies of subject-verb disagreement. Table 18 illustrates the percentages of agreement and disagreement frequencies for each group, and therefore reveals which group has more errors.

Table 18

Percentages of Subject-Verb Agreement and Disagreement by Language Group

| Subject-Verb Group | Agreement | Disagreement | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Chinese | 95.09 | 4.91 | 100.00 |
| Russian | 96.58 | 3.42 | 100.00 |
| Japanese | 97.71 | 2.29 | 100.00 |
| Spanish | 98.23 | 1.77 | 100.00 |

The groups are arranged from the highest percentage of disagreement to the lowest. As in the previous cases, the Chinese again made the most errors, the Russians rank number two, the Japanese number three, and the Spanish had the fewest cases of disagreement.

Because there appears to be a significant relationship between language background and the proportion of subject-verb disagreement, it is important to investigate this issue more deeply by looking at individual variation within a group.

Table 19

Frequencies and Percentages of Subject-Verb Agreement and Disagreement in the Chinese Subjects

| S-V Name | Agreement | Disagreement | Agreement Percentage | Disagreement Percentage | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Wan | 105 | 10 | 91.30 | 8.70 | 100.00 |
| Shan | 101 | 5 | 95.28 | 4.72 | 100.00 |
| Bing | 104 | 5 | 95.41 | 4.59 | 100.00 |
| Tian | 80 | 3 | 96.39 | 3.61 | 100.00 |
| Li | 94 | 2 | 97.92 | 2.08 | 100.00 |
| Total | 484 | 25 | ----- | ----- | ----- |

Table 19 presents each Chinese subject's performance in relation to the rest of the group. There is a range of 6.62 % between Wan, who made the most errors (8.70 %), and Li, who made the fewest errors (2.08 %). Each subject's position has changed from that in the previous categories except that of Wan, who remains at the top of the error scale. The same statistical treatment was carried out for each of the other language groups as shown in Tables 20 through 22.

Table 20

Frequencies and Percentages of Subject-Verb Agreement and Disagreement in the Russian Subjects

| S-V Name | Agreement | Disagreement | Agreement Percentage | Disagreement Percentage | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lara | 86 | 5 | 94.51 | 5.49 | 100.00 |
| Danuta | 107 | 5 | 95.54 | 4.46 | 100.00 |
| Boris | 82 | 3 | 96.47 | 3.53 | 100.00 |
| Leonid | 104 | 3 | 97.20 | 2.80 | 100.00 |
| Vladimir | 129 | 2 | 98.47 | 1.53 | 100.00 |
| Total | 508 | 18 | ----- | ----- | ----- |

The Russian subjects were arranged by proportion of errors, from the lowest to the highest. The position of each subject turned out to be exactly the same as that in Table 8, with a range of 3.96 in the percentage of errors, indicating a much smaller variation than in the Chinese group.

Table 21

Frequencies and Percentages of Subject-Verb Agreement and Disagreement in the Japanese Subjects

| S-V Name | Agreement | Disagreement | Agreement Percentage | Disagreement Percentage | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hidenari | 71 | 3 | 95.95 | 4.05 | 100.00 |
| Tetsunari | 87 | 3 | 96.67 | 3.33 | 100.00 |
| Maya | 92 | 3 | 96.84 | 3.16 | 100.00 |
| Kaori | 109 | 2 | 98.20 | 1.80 | 100.00 |
| Reiko | 110 | 0 | 100.00 | 0.00 | 100.00 |
| Total | 469 | 11 | ----- | ----- | ----- |

This table shows us the variation within the Japanese group. All the subjects are arranged by percentage of errors, from the highest to the lowest. It shows us that Kaori's and Reiko's rankings have remained the same in the group as in the previous two categories, but the other three subjects have switched places. Reiko did not have any incidents of subject-verb disagreement at all, leaving the range in the percentage of errors as 4.05, which falls between the Chinese and the Russian groups.

Table 22

Frequencies and Percentages of Subject-Verb Agreement and Disagreement in the Spanish Subjects

| S-V Name | Agreement | Disagreement | Agreement Percentage | Disagreement Percentage | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Martin | 98 | 5 | 95.15 | 4.85 | 100.00 |
| Maria | 125 | 3 | 97.66 | 2.34 | 100.00 |
| Carmen | 108 | 1 | 99.08 | 0.92 | 100.00 |
| Roberto | 117 | 1 | 99.15 | 0.85 | 100.00 |
| Grace | 108 | 0 | 100.00 | 0.00 | 100.00 |
| Total | 556 | 10 | ----- | ----- | ----- |

The table above is a table of variation within the Spanish group, in descending order of subject-verb disagreement. As we can see, Grace's and Roberto's positions are the same as those in Tables 10 and 16. Since Grace did not make any errors, the range in the percentage of disagreement is the highest percentage, 4.85, slightly higher than the ranges in the Japanese and the Russian groups and slightly lower than that in the Chinese group. There seems to be much less variation within groups as far as subject-verb agreement is concerned. However, the group rankings for subject-verb agreement are consistent with those in correctly and incorrectly filled verb slots and tense/aspect.

Turning now to problems with the periphrastic structures of some English verb forms, details for auxiliary verb errors are presented next. The same statistical test was run on the frequencies in this category for each group as shown in Table 23.

Table 23

Frequencies of Correct and Incorrect Auxiliaries by Language Group

| Auxiliary Group | Correct | Incorrect | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Chinese | 167 | 9 | 176 |
| Japanese | 205 | 9 | 214 |
| Russian | 172 | 11 | 183 |
| Spanish | 218 | 6 | 224 |

Pearson chi-square value: 2.945; $p = 0.400$ ($> 0.05$)

Since $X^2 = 2.945$, with a p of 0.400, which is bigger than 0.05, the relationship between first language and proportion of errors in using auxiliaries is not significant. As a result, individual differences were not shown in this case.

The finite type of error for which results are presented next is that of the choice of verb. There are cases where a wrong lexical item was chosen rather than the appropriate one, as was discussed in the method section. As before, a two-way chi-square test was run to determine if the differences between groups were significant.

Table 24

Frequencies of Correct and Incorrect Lexical Finite Verb Choices by Language Group

| Verb Choice Group | Correct | Incorrect | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Chinese | 699 | 10 | 709 |
| Japanese | 677 | 4 | 681 |
| Russian | 743 | 6 | 749 |
| Spanish | 705 | 2 | 707 |

Pearson chi-square value: 6.284; $p = 0.099$ ($> 0.05$)

Since $X^2 = 6.284$, with a p of 0.099, which is bigger than 0.05, the relationship between language background and choice of lexical verb is not significant. Hence, it was considered unnecessary to show individual performance in each group.

Summary of Results

This chapter has shown the results of Pearson chi-square analysis for various aspects of finite verb use within the OPI advanced level among the subjects from the four language groups selected. Results were different when the four groups were compared in the following areas: correctly and incorrectly filled finite verb slots, tense/aspect use, subject-verb agreement, auxiliary use, and choice of verb. We found a significant relationship between first language and frequency of errors in tense/aspect use, subject-verb agreement and disagreement, and the percentage of total error-free finite verb slots, but no significant association between the two variables in auxiliary use and lexical verb choice. In areas where a significant difference was found, we also discovered a consistent ranking pattern among the four language groups. The Chinese consistently produced the most errors, followed by the Russians. The Japanese performed better than the Russians, while the Spanish speakers made the fewest errors. When looking at the gaps between the groups for correctly and incorrectly filled finite verb slots, there is a big gap (7.15%) between the Chinese and the next one group (the Russians) on the ranking scale. Between the Russians and the Japanese and between the Japanese to the Spanish, the distances are respectively 1.96% and 2.32%. The distances between groups in tense/aspect also show this diminishing tendency in that the gap between the Chinese and the Russians is the biggest (2.18 %), while the differences between the Russians and the Japanese, and between the Japanese and the Spanish are 1.83 and 0.89. Each group made the fewest errors in the category of subject-verb agreement. However, it is still shown that the

distances from the Chinese to the Spanish between every two groups get smaller and smaller.

Individual differences were not subjected to the chi-square analysis. However, the ranges in the percentage of incorrect usage in each category included were calculated, and in each category the ranges were compared across groups. When considering the grammatical correctness of each verb slot and tense/aspect use, the Spanish group appears to have the least variation among its members. The groups that reveal the highest error range, in different categories, are the Chinese and the Russians. The Russians show the highest range in correctly and incorrectly filled verb slots; the Chinese show the highest range in tense/aspect and subject-verb disagreement. We have to note that there is not much individual variation in subject-verb agreement within each group.

In addition, the ranking of each subject within the group was compared across categories. In the Chinese group, Wan made the highest percentage of errors in each category examined. In terms of tense/aspect usage and the grammatical accuracy of the verb slots, the ranking of each Japanese subject showed no change. In the category of subject-verb agreement, Kaori's and Reiko's positions remained the same, while the other three switched places. Kaori and Reiko remained in the bottom two positions all the way through, showing the most grammatical accuracy. In the Russian group, Vladimir consistently demonstrated the most grammatical accuracy within the group. In the Spanish group, although the range of the percentages of error was relatively small, it was possible to identify Grace as the best and Roberto the second best. The information on rankings helps us to discern more about individual variation, because if two out of five people in one group are consistently better than the rest as in the case of the Japanese group, where the range is not very small, we need to take a closer look at them to explore the reasons for such a performance. There may be the possibility that the good performance of two individuals positively affects the figures for the whole group. In the Spanish group, we also found two subjects to be consistently good. However, because

the group range stayed small, there is not much gap between these two and the rest of the group.

The next chapter will look at these results in more detail and explore possible explanations for these differences between groups and between individuals. That will lead us to some answers to our research questions about the nature of the OPI and the inadequacy of first language interference as the sole source of errors for ESL learners.

# CHAPTER VI

# DISCUSSION

A large amount of data has been collected in this study on various aspects of finite verb use in the OPI. In the last chapter, percentages, chi-square test results, and probability levels of error frequencies of twenty advanced speakers of English in correctly and incorrectly filled finite verb slots, tense/aspect, subject-verb agreement were presented. This chapter is an attempt to explain the significant differences within the advanced level and hence explore the nature of the OPI as a language test and the meaning of its ratings.

## Tense/Aspect Use Among All Language Groups

As pointed out in the previous chapter, one of the significant results concerning native language and grammatical performance lay in tense/aspect use. Results show an apparent link between native language and the frequency of occurrence of tense/aspect errors, and the ranking from the worst to the best among the four groups was Chinese, Russian, Japanese, and Spanish.

In Chapter Three, we conjectured that, based on CA, the Chinese would have more trouble with English tense/aspect markings than the other three language groups because the Chinese language does not signal tense on the verb, even though it does have some aspect suffixes such as le and guo, showing completion of an action or experience. The other three languages, however, do have their own ways of marking the verbs for different tenses. At first glance, the results obtained here seem to support a hypothesis

based on contrastive analysis. However, we cannot jump to the conclusion that contrastive analysis is the right explanation based on this one result alone. We have to look at the nature of the errors made by these subjects.

Because Chinese does not mark tense on the verb, we are tempted to say that the reason that the Chinese subjects made the most errors in tense/aspect in the OPI is that the Chinese language interferes with the subjects' performance in English in terms of using the correct tense and aspect. It seems very reasonable to say that Chinese speakers of English, as far as tense is concerned, are faced with a situation of zero transfer because of a lack of distinction between tenses in Chinese to presence of marking in English on the verb in certain tenses and aspects. However, the nature of their errors in tense should be examined.

A great proportion of the errors were made when the simple present tense was used when the simple past was required. For example, in the interview with Shan, she told the interviewer that her former English teacher got her interested in I Love Lucy.

DIS1 Shan: ...uh before I was learning English the teacher put this tape on class, and so I like it. I start to watch it every day.

Here, Shan should have used the past tense form of the two underlined verbs because she was talking about experiences in the past.

However, the fact that subjects from the other three language groups also made the same kind of error, although fewer in number, makes the issue muddier. Using present tense verb forms for past tense could be a developmental error at this stage since we are dealing with advanced speakers of English. It is possible that these subjects overgeneralized the rules for English historical present.

Using present for past is only one kind of tense/aspect error, though the major type. On a few occasions, subjects used the past tense form of a finite verb when the present tense form was needed. In the same interview with Shan, she was explaining why a child should have a happy, pressure-free childhood.

DIS2 Shan: Hmm under the uhh situation, well, they grow up, they can face all the difficult, I mean, they can face all the, every situation. But I don't think it's worth, you know, because lost half childhood.

The meaning of the above utterance is hardly clear, but what she was basically trying to convey was the idea that since children are going to grow up one day and face all kinds of difficulties, they ought to have a happy, carefree childhood and should not lose half of their childhood by studying too hard. In any case, lost should be in present tense because she was discussing a general situation. In addition, every other finite verb is in the present tense. There seems to be no justification for this particular verb being in its past tense form to a native speaker of English. However, the matter may not be that simple. It might be a lack of distinction between parts of speech, for example, the confusion over the part of speech of the word lost. The subject may think that lost is an adjective.

There were also occasions where the present perfect tense should have been chosen rather than the past tense, which can be illustrated by the following example.

DIS3 Tian: Yeah, I, I would say, you know, because um mainland China and Taiwan were separated for more than forty years, and Taiwan is a freed, free country, but mainland China is communist.

Judging by the fact that mainland China and Taiwan are still separated, the correct form for the underlined finite verb should be have been separated. Perhaps this is a developmental error of form. Maybe the two forms of past simple and present perfect are not fixed in the interviewee's mind. This is not a transfer from Chinese because in Chinese neither tense is marked.

In conclusion, even though using present tense verb forms in place of past tense verb forms was the major downfall of the Chinese subjects, there were also instances where past tense forms were used when present tense forms should have been selected. However, examination of the other three groups revealed a similar pattern, which points us to the issue of overgeneralization which happens in both first language and second

language acquisition (Burt, Dulay, & Hernandez, 1973; Bailey, Madden, & Krashen, 1974).

Because of the limited size of the sample in each group, we also have to look at individual variation in each group. Among the Chinese subjects, there is the widest range (8.61%) in the occurrence of error in tense/aspect. The Spanish group seemed to show the smallest gap between the best (2.88%) and the worst (5.88%), providing evidence that it is the most stable among the four groups. Japanese come second in terms of range (8.31%), and the range in the Russian group was 5.40%.

The relatively wide range in the Chinese group cast doubt on the effectiveness of CA in explaining our results because the wide range shows that average data on the Chinese group are not very representative of every member of the group. Some members, for example, Tian, were much better than the others. If CA were right, why would this happen in the same language group? The same principle applies to the Japanese group where there is also a relatively large gap between the best and the worst.

Subject-Verb Agreement

The discussion in Chapter Three points out that Chinese does not have any requirement for subject-verb agreement. Similar to Chinese, Japanese does not have such a requirement, either. On the other hand, Russian and Spanish both have a much more extensive system than English in terms of subject-verb agreement.

If first language interference is the only source of error, we would expect the Chinese and Japanese subjects to have the most trouble dealing with subject-verb agreement in English, and Spanish and Russian speakers not to have much problem.

However, our CA-based hypothesis was not well supported by the results obtained. Similar results to those related to tense/aspect use were found when the performance in subject-verb agreement was examined by group. The rankings from the

most disagreement problems to the fewest disagreement problems were again Chinese, Russian, Japanese and Spanish. It is noteworthy that the Japanese did better than the Russians.

First language interference cannot explain this result. Tracing back to their native languages, both Chinese and Japanese speakers learning English subject-verb agreement are learning a linguistic feature that does not exist in their own language. And yet the Japanese subjects did significantly better than the Russians, who do make a distinction between plural and singular and mark more distinctions than English does. Our data do not confirm our earlier hypothesis at all.

When we take a closer look at the results obtained in the previous chapter, we notice that the differences between language groups on subject-verb agreement are not very large, though statistically significant. That is an indication that all the advanced subjects have reached a certain level of proficiency, where subject-verb agreement does not pose a serious problem for them anymore.

Besides, individual variation is something we have to take into consideration. Among the Japanese subjects, Reiko made no errors in subject-verb agreement; Kaori also showed high proficiency in subject-verb agreement, with a percentage of errors of 1.80 . It seems that these two have positively affected the results. However, if we compare each Japanese with each corresponding Russian by his/her ranking in the group, the Japanese is always better than the Russian. Therefore, we can be sure that contrastive analysis cannot provide an adequate explanation for this.

Correctly and Incorrectly Filled Finite Verbs

The frequencies of incorrect (for whatever reason) finite verb slots for all four groups were tabulated and tested by the Pearson chi-square test to see which group had the most control over finite verb use in general. Interestingly enough, the ranking from

the highest percentage of error to the lowest remains the same as that found in the other two categories, tense/aspect and subject-verb agreement. The Chinese subjects again were at the top of the scale of error, the Russians were second, the Japanese third, and the Spanish speakers the last.

The results are very hard to explain because they reflect the subjects' abilities in all ten areas as listed in Chapter Four. What we know is that there is no significant difference between groups for auxiliaries and lexical verb choice, and that the opposite is true for tense/aspect and subject-verb agreement. Categories that are not treated separately are absence of finite verb, conditional problems, verb-preposition problems, voice problems, verb form problems, and word order problems. Because correctly and incorrectly filled verb slots should cover all the error types, we can only say that in terms of general abilities in finite verb usage, the ranking order is Chinese, Russian, Japanese and Spanish, not knowing specifically who did what better.

The researcher's raw data show that all the untreated error types seem to be pretty evenly scattered among all four language groups, which shows that these problems are not specific to any language group or groups. In Chapter Three, we considered that the Russians and Japanese might have some problems getting the word order right in English. However, the interviews we have did not show any problems related to first language interference at all. All the word order problems occurred in embedded questions, where the word order is the same as that in a question. The errors we see from our data indicate that this might be a developmental error because all the error instances are of the same nature. We also predicted that the Russians might have a problem with using the passive voice in English, but voice seems to be a minor problem; in general it did not seem to pose a problem for the subjects. While there were four instances of error for the Chinese, four for the Japanese, and five for the Spanish, only one Russian subject made one error in word order in our general data, that is, before data length was controlled for the purpose of this study.

Our data so far do not seem to provide enough evidence for hypotheses based on contrastive analysis. As we have noticed, individual differences seem to be an important factor in this study because of the limited size of sample from each language group.

A Closer Look at Some Individuals

In this section, we are going to look at some individual subjects whose performance overshadowed that of the rest of the group, hoping to find possible explanations for the data we have. Of course we cannot generalize from these individuals. However, the idiosyncratic nature of some of the subjects' performances may prove very interesting. After all, we are dealing with individual language learners no matter how we categorize them.

There always seemed to be a gap between Reiko, Kaori and the rest of the Japanese group. Although the rankings of the other three members changed from category to category, the rankings of these two remained the same in each area of verb use examined. Reasons were searched for in their interviews. It was soon discovered that Reiko, at the time of interview, had been in America for six years. After studying for six weeks in a language school, she enrolled in a graduate program and earned a master's degree in TESL. From the interview, we also learned that she was an English teacher in Japan and that she was a teacher of Japanese at a university in the States. When asked to compare teaching English with teaching Japanese, she said,

DIS4 Oh, I did teach English, but that time I, I had no experience in, well I I didn't study how to teach, I was just uh, I was just uh teaching as other teachers do in Japan...after going through the program, I became aware of uh a lot of things, uh the approaches, the diffe..., the learner approaches, strategies, you know the those things, and I found that really fascinating, and now I can apply that into my teaching situation...

Later on in the interview, we also found out that Reiko had an American boyfriend. That may presumably have helped her English to some extent as well.

Kaori was another case of a person holding a master's degree in TESOL from a US university. At the time of the interview, she was pursuing a Ph.D. degree in education at a state university.

Educationally, Reiko and Kaori seem to have an advantage over the other Japanese subjects. When interviewed, Hidenari had been in the States for one year, studying in an American university, with a bachelor's degree in English from a university in Japan; Maya was also studying at an American university as an undergraduate; Tetsunari had just graduated from an undergraduate program in an American university after being in an intensive English program. We have no idea how long Maya and Tetsunari had been in the States when interviewed, but none of them held a master's degree from a US university, let alone a master's degree in TESL.

The Russians had more diverse backgrounds. All five subjects immigrated to America for a variety of reasons. Except for Lara, who was attending a university in the States, the others were working at various jobs. Boris did mention that he took some courses at a Community College on the east coast. It seems as if the Japanese subjects were more involved in the academic world than the Russians at the time of interview; all of the Japanese had formal English learning experience in the States whereas most of the Russians were working or busy looking for a job. That could be seen as one possible reason to explain the gap in English grammatical proficiency between the Japanese and the Russians.

Why Did the Japanese Subjects Have the Lowest Number of Finite Verb Slots?

As described in Chapter Four, the frequencies tabulated in this study were frequencies per 5,000 words by group, which in turn are totals of frequencies per 1,000

words from each of the five interviews in the group. In this way, the length of data collected from each subject was tightly controlled. This method also enabled us to investigate a possible overall avoidance of using finite verbs by looking at the total number of finite verb slots per 5,000 words in each group.

It is easy to see that the total number of finite verb slots for the Japanese was the smallest (f = 681), whereas the highest number of finite verb slots belonged to the Russians (f = 755). The Chinese (f = 718) and the Spanish (f = 706) were very close. It was possible that some of the Japanese were trying to avoid using finite verbs in the interviews. With that in mind, the researcher searched for a question from the interviewer that was put to every subject, hoping to find something in their answers that can explain this. One question was found, but only in some interviews across language groups. This was a question requiring the interviewees to compare two lifestyles.

Because the question was not universally asked of everybody and it is only one question out of many questions, the researcher feared that it would be misleading and overgeneralizing to attempt to look at the answers quantitatively. The researcher, therefore, qualitatively looked at the answers to the same question or a similar question across groups. One example from each language group was chosen to illustrate the point.

Chinese:

DIS5 Interviewer: How about your life? Is your life so different now than it would be if you were in Beijing?

Shan: Yeah. Well, I was in school. Yes, my mum always uh expect I got the higher score, and I did competed with other girls. I went in a girls' school, all girls, and uh I really want to do the best, and I know the future is in my hard work.

Russian:

DIS6 Interviewer: What were some of the hardest things to adjust to when you came to this country? I'm not, I mean it it may be a great

country, and it may be good to newcomers, but it still must have been difficult.

Boris: Oh, yeah, oh yeah. And you are right. What is the hardest thing? Hardest thing was a lack of money, you know. Because I didn't have savings over there. It was impossible in Russia, and uh I should start to work just after four months in America, and I got my first job. It was seven dollars twenty-five cents per hour. For Charlotte, it's not bad and it was hard to raise some money to buy a car, to pay bills, you know, ma...material part of life was hard. But my morale was good was okay, because I was pleased.

Spanish:

DIS7 Interviewer: So there are advantages to living with a family, but the disadvantages are bigger. What are the disadvantages?

Roberto: The disadvantages of living in a family? I would say that you don't have freedom. Um eh your parents, most of the time, they put you to do something you don't like to do it. They tell you the way you they'd like you to do it, and you don't have most of the time it depends if you're the first member of the family or you're the second or the third that you don't have a, I mean you don't have any right to express your opinion.

Japanese:

DIS8 Interviewer: Well, okay where do you think the quality of life for you is better?

Reiko: Hmmm, right now I'm pretty sure it's here. Yeah.

Interviewer: Could you tell me why?

Reiko: Why? Hmm let's see. Hm never describe, I know I've never asked myself in this way but uh intuitively I feel that way first. Uhh I'm more comfortable being here. Of course I have to struggle through uhh life here you know I have to. In Japan, you can sit down and relax and then people can do a lot of things for you. But here you really have to say things, "I want this, I don't want this, I need this, I have to do this, this and this." But if you, as long as you know the, well the rules here, uh you're fine I think. Well, you have to, of course you face a lot of problems like, in their stereotypes and prejudices, a lot of things, but once you understand that, they try to sort of reach over it and then your life now you can see the different dimensions and you can make other people realize that also. Whereas in Japan uhh even though you know the rules, I mean I can follow that rules, Of course when I, I ha...I mean I don't really have to, them my reaction to it, to the, to all the rules is kind of, kind of unpleasant I think. I don't like that way. Uhh I have to act there.

As we can see from the four paragraphs above, there do seem to be longer intervals between finite verbs in Reiko's speech than in that of the other three. There seem to be more adverbials such as of course, really, just in Reiko's speech. In addition, she used many extra phrases to further define things that she mentioned. For example, when talking about problems she faced living in America, she gave examples of problems such as stereotypes and prejudices, which certainly add more words to her speech which are not finite verbs. There are also more complex and compound sentences where connectors such as whereas and when are used. All these factors make Reiko's speech more of a

hybrid of sentence types and phrases, rather than just simple subject plus verb sentences, which is the case with the other three speech samples.

Of course, this issue deserves another study on its own. The above is merely the researcher's observation, without any statistical proof at all. But it might be one possible explanation of the Japanese lower number of finite verb slots.

English Teaching in the Subjects' Home Countries

So far CA has failed to give us a satisfactory answer to the differences we found between groups. Therefore, it is necessary to explore on a bigger scope than the nature of the first language. As the subjects with the same native language often shared the same educational background, we might be able to find some explanations or eliminate some speculations by looking at how English is taught in those countries. All the Japanese speakers were from Japan; all the Russian speakers were from the former Soviet Union; most of the Spanish speakers were from Mexico, if not from another country in Latin America; the Chinese subjects came from China and Taiwan, two social systems, but the same language background.

It would be too simplistic to assume that English education in China and in Taiwan is the same just because the two countries speak the same language. Therefore, a comparison between the two systems seems to be necessary.

Sprenger (1985) recognized several barriers to Taiwanese learning English; one problem is the thinking behind English teaching. While the learning of western languages is stressed in school, some people are also afraid that students are not getting enough education in the Chinese culture. As a compromise, textbook writers are asked to represent as much Chinese culture as possible in the English textbooks. Traditional teaching and learning approaches are also a stumbling block because they produce imitative behavior which leads to passive approaches to learning a foreign language. The

adoption of out-moded structuralist and behaviorist approaches to language teaching from the west in the past two decades has also not benefited Taiwanese learners, either. "Heavy emphasis was placed on phonological problems, pattern practice and transformational exercises" (Sprenger, p. 87). Moreover, the Joint Colleges Entrance Examination (JCEE) plays an important role in determining the teaching techniques in secondary education, and most items in the test are structural items. Communicative skills are basically ignored throughout the whole educational system. The researcher was stunned to hear that English classes for English majors in college and university were conducted in Chinese (Y. S. Yu, personal communication, December 15, 1993).

On the other side of the Taiwan Strait, English education in the People's Republic of China is in no way ideal. In modern China, the traditional idea of maintaining the Chinese culture and spirit does not seem to be as strong as in Taiwan because of the rule of the Communist Party since 1949. The ten-year cultural revolution (1966-1976) treated everything traditional as old, and suggested that it should be eliminated from the society. Anything that was vaguely foreign was also abolished. Consequently, foreign language education suffered a great deal (Moffett, 1983). Schools were literally not functioning for a few years. The recovery started after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. As China gradually opened up to the outside world, English and other foreign languages such as Japanese, German and French were revived. However, just as in Taiwan, China has the tradition of teaching foreign languages using the grammar translation and audiolingual methods (Wang, 1981), and that has been and is still the major method used in foreign language teaching. Students' learning styles are very well summarized in Harvey's (1985) article, in which he pointed out that careful translation of texts, memorization of dialogs, and grammatical analysis are still the major ways to learn English. Like Taiwan's JCEE, in China there are university entrance examinations in which English is a subject. Similarly, grammatical points constitute the bulk of the test. Since most educated young people (high school graduates and college graduates) are anxious to go overseas to study, the

TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) has become something of an obsession. It is not uncommon to see young people spend most of their spare time preparing for the TOEFL (Burnaby & Sun, 1989). Even though teacher training courses are offered in normal (teacher training) universities and colleges (Moffett, 1983), training often emphasizes study in English much more than teaching methodologies or educational theories (Burnaby & Sun, 1989). Moffett's (1983) observation of twenty-five institutions ranging from elementary schools to universities, from Beijing in the north to Kunming in the south, revealed "the inability of some teachers to keep in the target language, the predominance of teacher-talk over student-talk, the complete absence or lack of a variety of visual aids, and at advanced levels the proclivity to use the traditional-bound lecture technique" (p. 16). Sprenger's (1985) claim about language teaching shortcomings in Taiwan, that "even after six years of English training on the secondary school level students feel lost when asked to communicate in English," (Sprenger, 1985, p. 87) may equally be applied to China.

Therefore, it appears that the Chinese subjects made the most verb mistakes not because they do not know the rules, but because they do not apply the rules in oral communication, as assessed by the OPI. We are not totally unjustified in blaming the foreign language teaching systems in China and in Taiwan for learners' lack of control of certain grammatical constructions in a naturalistic setting. One reason could be that communicative competence has been ignored until recently. Students educated in the traditional grammar translation method are generally better at receptive skills than at productive skills such as speaking. Lack of practice in speaking makes it hard to internalize the grammatical rules (Bialystok, 1982). This could be one reason why the Chinese speakers made the most errors in finite verbs.

It is equally necessary for us to examine foreign language teaching in the other three geographical areas to find out if there are any basic differences in the nature of language education.

A brief review of the Soviet foreign language system reveals a totally different picture. Nash (1971) was impressed with the quality of the English teachers, good facilities and an emphasis on phonetics in Soviet English teaching. There are two kinds of schools in the former Soviet Union: the so-called specialized language school and the ordinary general education schools (Bartley, 1971). The largest number of language schools are for English (Monk, 1990). The general theory behind foreign language teaching is the Practical-Consciousness Method (PCM), which emphasizes "consciousness" and "activeness" and has been the foundation of Soviet foreign language education for the last two decades (Monk, 1990). "The principle of consciousness means that the student should understand what he is learning" (Bartley, 1971, p. 43), which is different from the Chinese traditional style of mechanical cramming. A US report ("Perspectives on Foreign," 1991) recorded some of the more recent changes in the Soviet Union, including more emphasis on teacher discretion and authentic materials and high motivation of the students. Nash (1971) felt that the purpose of an average person studying English in the Soviet Union is to enrich his/her life, with no fear of losing the Russian culture. Concerning fundamental beliefs about language teaching, there is no difference between the general education schools and the specialized schools. In both schools, oral work is given the greatest attention (Monk, 1990).

It is not difficult to describe the tremendous differences between the Soviet and Chinese methodologies. One stresses understanding and practice, with an emphasis on oral work, whereas the other stresses memorization, with an emphasis on structure. Of course, these are generalized statements which cannot be held true for every individual or for every school, but the general difference could help explain why the Russians did better on the OPI than the Chinese as far as finite verbs are concerned.

Cultural and economic factors in Mexico have produced an English language teaching environment different from both those of the Russians and the Chinese. Language teaching in Mexico offers a more optimistic picture than either of these.

Bilingual (Spanish-English) schools in Mexico are numerous, and at undergraduate and graduate levels, a large number of the textbooks and key articles are only available in English ("English Teaching Profile," 1981). The popularity of English, of course, has something to do with the country's geographical proximity to the United States. That is to some extent illustrated by Grace's comments when she was asked to recommend a school to the interviewer. She said,

> DIS9 Well, I think that in The American School helps us a lot because we, you know two languages, and we Mexicans and mostly from Monterrey, we travel more, more to the States than to Mexico, and it's very easy to travel to the States because we know how to handle, like if you get lost like even if you're a small children because when you're young in The American School, you know how to speak English since you're very young, and you if you get lost, you can ask your way out of it and go to a policeman or something.

Here, she was describing an American school where, according to her, all classes were offered in English from nursery all the way to a bachelor's degree. This is one of the so-called bilingual cultural schools where the teaching is in English rather than of English ("English Teaching Profile," 1981). Also, as far as teacher training is concerned, the situation in Mexico is quite different from that in China. According to a British Council report, private language schools and many institutes offer pre-service and in-service courses "with diverse methodological bases, course contents and emphases" ("English Teaching Profile," 1981). In addition, in many of the major foreign language departments there are native English speakers on the staff as well as more and more Mexican teachers with MAs in applied linguistics obtained in either Britain or the United States. One of the Spanish-speaking subjects was a staff member at a prestigious institute in Monterrey at the time of the interview. He confirmed the fact that universities prefer an MA degree from

their English teachers. Roberto said, "They, they're asking us to get a, well, not all the Ph.D., but the master degree in the English as a second language."

Compared with Mexico and the former Soviet Union, the Chinese seem to be lagging behind in English teaching, even though changes are being made and general English proficiency is improving. Only a small number of Chinese English teachers at the tertiary level have a master's degree in applied linguistics, literature, or education from an English-speaking country. Most English teachers are English majors holding a bachelor's degree or a master's degree from a college or a university in China.

Interestingly enough, English teaching in Japan, in many ways, resembles that in China. A brief review of literature on this subject shows that it is no better than in China or Taiwan. Grammar translation is still the prominent teaching method. It is not uncommon to hear applied linguists calling for a switch from the present emphasis on spelling, grammar, translation, and reading comprehension to the nurturing of communicative competence (Yashiro, 1988). Reiko's description of her English teaching experience earlier in this chapter confirms that general impression. Henrichsen (1986) pointed out Japanese teachers' lack of oral proficiency as one of the obstacles to promoting Fries' Oral Approach in Japan. Moreover, the conforming tendency of Japanese society has translated into uniformizing teaching materials and methodology all over Japan at any regular school (Ishiwata, 1990). Inspection of several Japanese-English textbooks for junior high schools indicated that the materials were arranged in grammar sequences (Okushi, 1990). It is not uncommon to hear complaints from college English teachers about the English competence of their students. Shishin (1986) felt the need to undo the damage done to the students by the grammar translation method earlier in their lives, and one way to do that is to develop skills lacking in the students such as creativity and critical thinking, which are usually ignored in the Japanese educational system. The development of communicative skills is another thing ignored within the educational system ("English Language Teaching," 1977). Just as in China and Taiwan, the entrance

examinations for higher education institutions determine the extrinsic nature of some students' motivation for learning English, which is an "emphasis on the end product of education" (Kamada, 1987, p. 1).

The rather gloomy situation of English teaching in Japan makes it hard to explain why the Japanese subjects in this study did significantly better than the Chinese. At least, the difference in performance cannot be attributed to a difference in teaching styles in their countries. As discussed earlier in this chapter, individual variation in educational background and exposure to English in an ESL situation still seems to be the most reasonable explanation in this case.

OPI: A Discrete-point Test or a Communicative Test?

The results obtained from comparing the degrees of accuracy in using finite verbs in English of speakers from four different language groups indicated that there was a significant association between home culture and English teaching practices and the percentage of error frequencies in all the categories included in this study, including tense/aspect. That seems to contradict the requirement in the Guidelines that advanced level speakers should be able to narrate and describe in major time frames. If the OPI were a discrete-point test as described by some critics (Van Lier, 1989; Kramsch, 1986; Savignon, 1985), some of the subjects in this study would not have been rated as advanced, simply because of their less-than-perfect control over tense and aspect. However, that was not the case. All the subjects made it to the advanced level in spite of the significant differences in various areas of finite verb use. We have to note that these interviewees were rated advanced simply because their performance measured up to the descriptors. The OPI does not take into consideration interviewees' backgrounds at all. In fact, among the twenty subjects, no one demonstrated perfect control over finite verb use. This provides some evidence that the OPI relies less heavily on grammar than its

critics have maintained. Accuracy is certainly one of the criteria, but it is certainly not the only one. Context, content and text type are just as important. The first rater told the researcher that Reiko, in spite of her higher degree of accuracy, was disqualified from the superior level partly because she could not do a role play in which she was supposed to give an acceptance speech for receiving an award for promoting multicultural understanding (Halleck, personal communication, February 17, 1995). That shows the importance of sociolinguistic competence, which the role play is supposed to measure, in the rater's scale of measurement.

Nevertheless, does that mean that the OPI has no criteria for grammatical accuracy at all? The answer is no, based on the empirical findings in this study. Statistical results tell us that the highest percentage of error in tense/aspect is 9.21 and the lowest 4.31, and the gap between the two is not very large. Correctly and incorrectly filled verb slots show a range of 11.43. Subject-verb agreement reveals the smallest difference of only 3.14. The difference in correctly and incorrectly filled verb slots is the greatest because this category is inclusive of every kind of error related to finite verb usage found in the data collected in this study. The reason that this big difference in performance did not disqualify some of the groups at the higher end of the scale of error, such as the Chinese, from being rated as advanced is that nowhere in the Guidelines does it say that advanced level speakers cannot make any grammatical errors. The only explicit requirement is that they have to be able to use the different tenses in English and be understood without difficulty by those unaccustomed to non-native speakers, which does not mean that they have to have one hundred percent control over tense/aspect.

When we take another look at the results gained in the category of tense/aspect by group, we find that the difference is really not very large. The highest percentage of error is 9.21 by group, within 10%. Even when we look at each individual's performance, the highest percentage of error is 12.58, by Wan.

Our data and statistical results suggest that the OPI is not a grammar grid. On the contrary, it seems to be quite tolerant of accuracy errors at this level. By the same token, how much tolerance is allowed in the OPI rating? That seems to be a gray area, but at least this study has shed some light on the kind of allowance made by an experienced rater. The researcher has experienced some frustration in carrying out OPI ratings, as to how much to focus on accuracy. It has been admitted that "it is time-consuming and often expensive to become an accurate and elegant oral proficiency interviewer and rater...There seems to be no shortcut around intensive training workshops that expose the participants to numerous speech samples and engage them in extensive discussion of the relationship between those speech samples and the words of the level descriptions" (Liskin-Gasparro, 1987a, p. 25).

The findings in this study go somewhat against a rigid interpretation of the OPI assessment guidelines. All the subjects were advanced speakers of English, and we would assume that their degree of accuracy should be controlled by the rating, and that their grammatical accuracy should be at about the same level. However, that does not seem to be the case. Within the same level, the subjects vary in terms of their control over the finite verbs in English in the interview situation. Results show that grammatical accuracy is determined by many factors including overgeneralization, educational background, English learning experience, or simply individual variation. This leads us to think that the accusation of the OPI being a test of grammar is not well justified, because the groups or the individuals that performed worst were not disqualified from this level just because of that. As Engelskirchen, Cottrell and Oller (1981) commented when talking about the nature of rating, "it can be argued that both trained and native judges seem equally incapable of distinguishing the various characteristics of speech that the multiplicity of scales aim at. They seem good at judging one central variable--probably it should be called 'communicative effectiveness'" (p. 84). The same thing seems to have happened in the rating of these interviews. Communicative competence must have attracted a fair

amount of attention from the raters. On the other hand, the OPI did not seem to be insensitive to tense/aspect error because no subject made an outrageously high percentage of error on tense/aspect.

Our review earlier in the discussion shows that the Chinese speaking subjects should have a sound knowledge of English grammatical rules. However, in real oral communication, they failed more than any other group in this study to apply those rules probably because they were focusing on content rather on form at the time of communication. That is viewed as evidence that the OPI is a more global test, testing the productive system of the learner, trying to find out if the learner can apply rules that he or she knows (Gradman & Hanania, 1990).

# CHAPTER VII

# IMPLICATIONS

The purposes of this study were to find out if the OPI based its rating on the interviewee's grammatical competence and if native language would influence a person's accuracy in using finite verbs in English. If such an influence were found, it would show that OPI rating was tolerant of grammatical inaccuracy because subjects' communicative competence presumably made up in some holistic way for such inaccuracy, allowing them to be placed at the Advanced level by a certified ACTFL OPI rater.

The results of this research, however, rejected the researcher's hypotheses concerning the possible errors that subjects from each language background might produce according to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. Although there were significant group differences in the frequency of errors in a few areas of grammatical usage, first language influence was not able to explain the results. An investigation of overgeneralization, individual variation, and English teaching methods used in the subjects' home countries was carried out in a speculative manner because these factors are very complicated. The important finding was that contrastive analysis is inadequate as a theory to account for difficulties and errors in second language acquisition.

However, a more significant implication of this study is that it provides evidence that the OPI is not just another grammar test; it is apparently a test more of communicative competence than of grammatical accuracy. The results have provided us with some factual data of the kind of tolerance the OPI has in terms of grammatical accuracy even though this study did not attempt to set standards as to how grammatically

accurate one has to be to be rated as an advanced speaker of English. While scholars are arguing over the nature of the OPI as a test and its ratings, they also admit the lack of empirical evidence for whatever claims they are making (Lantolf & Frawley, 1985; Lowe, 1986; Valdman, 1988).

The findings in this study seem to raise questions about the rating of the OPI: What is being rated? How are the subjects rated? While researchers in this field are convinced that it takes experienced raters to do a good job of rating (Liskin-Gasparro, 1987a; Engelskirchen et al., 1981), we have to ask ourselves how much experience a rater has to have to be viewed as experienced. Could the ratings be too subjective, especially when decisions have to be made on borderline cases? Lowe (1985) did suggest that the gestalt rating of an OPI is a whole which is bigger than the sum of its parts. Since this study only looked at one factor in the descriptors and discovered that the ratings did not rely heavily on this factor, we cannot conclude anything definitive about the ratings of the OPI. Therefore, in the future we must address the meanings and values of test scores and determine the accuracy of the scores (Shohamy, 1987).

However, by no means does this study suggest that grammatical accuracy has been rendered obsolete and holds no important position on the OPI grading scale. The fact that the highest percentage of errors made by any individual or any group was around 10% tells us that the Advanced level does prescribe some standards for grammar but allows for a broader interpretation of those standards, possibly because of the greater attention paid to overall communicative ability. After all, "the Guidelines as rating level descriptions were originally developed on the basis of experiential data, reflecting the job-related language requirements of the population being tested" (Garrett, 1987, p. 195). Therefore, the Guidelines should demonstrate the capability to measure various aspects of language at the same time.

Consequently, for a learner of English to rise on the grading scale of the OPI, he/she has to have both communicative skills and grammatical abilities, a balance which is

in no way easy to achieve. The results of this study seem to convey a message to learners of English: Do not let your less than perfect grammar hinder you from accomplishing the functions of language you are good at, for example, narrating, describing, doing a role play, arguing, occasionally abstracting at the advanced level. As the findings in this study suggest, the rating tends to be holistic, taking many factors into consideration.

There were a few issues the researcher desired to examine but could not explore or include in this study. Firstly, it would have made more statistical sense to have a random sample instead of a convenience sample. In addition, it would have been better if we had a larger sample.

Secondly, this study only explored a small fraction of the grammatical side of the issue of whether the OPI is a communicative or a discrete-point test. More research needs to be conducted on how communicative competence is tested and rated, in the hope of providing a clearer definition of communicative competence.

Thirdly, this paper touched upon possible syntactic reasons for the fact that the Japanese subjects showed the lowest number of finite verb slots in their interviews; however, no quantitative analysis was applied in this study because of the complex nature of the whole issue, which deserves a research paper on its own. More studies need to be carried out to explore any other possible explanations.

Fourthly, English tense/aspect use at the intermediate level should also be measured so that we could compare the differences in the degree of tense/aspect accuracy between the advanced and the intermediate. The gap between the two levels in tense/aspect use would show us more clearly how tolerant or strict the OPI is at the advanced level.

Of course, other aspects of grammar also deserve our attention although they are not specifically prescribed in the ACTFL generic guidelines.

In spite of the limitations of this study, it has been a worthwhile effort to provide some empirical data on the validity of the OPI, which still desperately needs more

empirical data. The biggest contribution of this study lies in its analysis of the OPI ratings, which it suggests are not rigidly restricted by the grammatical descriptors, but probably respond to the communicative abilities of the testee. In addition, contrastive analysis was again proved to be unreliable as a predictor of difficulties and errors in second language acquisition.

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# APPENDIX A

## ORAL PROFICIENCY INTERVIEW LEVEL GUIDELINES BY THE AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

## Assessment Criteria: Speaking Proficiency

| Global Tasks/ Functions | Context | Content | Accuracy | Text Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SUPERIOR** | | | | |
| Can discuss extensively by supporting opinions, abstracting and hypothesizing | Most formal and informal settings | Wide range of general interest topics and some special fields of interest and expertise; concrete, abstract and unfamiliar topics | Errors virtually never interfere with communication or disturb the native speaker | Extended discourse |
| **ADVANCED** | | | | |
| Can describe and narrate in major time/aspect frames | Most informal and some formal settings | Concrete and factual topics of personal and public interest | Can be understood without difficulty by speakers unaccustomed to non-native speakers | Paragraph discourse |
| **INTERMEDIATE** | | | | |
| Can maintain simple face-to-face conversation by asking and responding to simple questions | Some informal settings and a limited number of transactional situations | Topics related primarily to self and immediate environment | Can be understood, with some repetition, by speakers accustomed to non-native speakers | Discrete sentences and strings of sentences |
| **NOVICE** | | | | |
| Can produce only formulaic utterances, lists and enumerations | Highly predictable common daily settings | Common discrete elements of daily life | May be difficult to understand, even for those accustomed to non-native speakers | Discrete words and phrases |

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