Do Young EFL Learners Construct Language in Limited Contexts? -A study of multi-word units based on the usage-based point of view

How do young learners of English construct language in limited contexts? In 2011, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology officially started to integrate the teaching of English as a full curriculum subject for all primary schools, and this calls for a sustained empirical investigation, since the mechanism of children's second language acquisition has not been fully investigated. The current study analyzes a corpus of five young Japanese learners of English, focusing on multi-word units, and explores how they become productive by usage. Numerous studies on the role of so called 'chunks' in first and second language acquisition have been conducted, but very few are examined in classroom situations. Needless to say, the participants of this study are learning their second language in a condition where input is extremely limited. The main focus of this study is whether the learners in such state will create novel expressions for their communicative needs, going beyond the use of holistic expressions.

Tomasello's usage-based account on language acquisition (2000), hold that children, in their leaning of L1, acquire language through a whole to parts, parts to whole process. Constructivists say that multi-words develop into creative words. In the process of breaking down and constructing new words, children use their pattern finding cognitive skills, which enable them to analyze multi-word units, and combine linguistic pieces together. The study hypothesizes that this mechanism can also be applied for young learners in instructed SLA situation, and that children will try to use whatever linguistic sources they have, to get their messages across.

The study built a 58,000-word corpus of five Japanese elementary school students who were seven or eight years old at the time of data collection. Video recordings of 54 lessons were transcribed, and the criteria of the learners' utterances were set for a quantitative analysis. The learners' utterances were first roughly categorized into single words, holistic words, analyzed words and constructions, to be summed up by stages. Statistical analyses were conducted by stages to elucidate unit development, and found that constructions increased significantly for all learners. The study also found that the learners' step by step linguistic analyses enabled recognition of slots and frame patterns. Thus utterance schemas emerged. e.g. [can I have a*], [* please] [no*] and [this is a *]. These results revealed the learners' potential to find patterns in language input, both of which support the usage-based claim that units of language are subject to analysis and that they become productive through usage.