Difficulty as an Affective Factor: Does 'No Error' Mean 'No Difficulty'?

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Abstract

This paper examines learners' perception of difficulty, a factor affecting motivation. Despite the fact that researchers and teachers would probably agree on the need to understand learner difficulty, the phenomenon of learners finding language learning difficult has not received much attention either in the research literature or in the professional literature of classroom language learning and teaching. This is mainly due to the assumption that errors adequately reflect difficulty. This paper discusses how learner difficulty is related to learner performance as well as how difficulty is perceived by individual learners, and considers the implications for task motivation.

Introduction

The problem of difficulty has long been one of the major topics in the literature of second/foreign language (L2) learning and teaching and is often associated with the issue of grading teaching materials. Nunan (1988: 48) states, "It is generally assumed that difficulty is the key factor in determining the ordering of items in a syllabus". What, then, is meant by difficulty? Does difficulty mean what researchers and/or teachers think is difficult for the learners? Or does it mean what the learners themselves think is difficult? Difficulty as characterized in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, for example, is in most cases product-oriented since "SLA research is about performance; it looks at actual utterances" (Ellis, 1985: 6). The analyses employed by researchers to identify learner difficulty include 'error analysis' and 'performance analysis', where difficulty is treated as a synonym of error. It is often assumed that learner errors adequately reflect learner difficulty. The evidence for this assumption includes the attack of some empirical studies against 'contrastive analysis' (CA) (e.g. Whitman and Jackson, 1972; Dulay and Burt, 1974). Contrastive Analysis hypothesizes that "those elements that are different [from the learner's native language] will be difficult" (Lado, 1957: 2). This hypothesis was greatly damaged in the 1970s by empirical work which showed that learner errors could not always be predicted or even explained by CA. Is it, we must ask, good theory to equate 'errors' with 'difficulty'? If that is the case, then, does 'no error' mean 'no difficulty'? This question seems to be crucial, especially when motivation comes into discussion and difficulty is viewed as an affective factor.

Significance of difficulty perceived by learners

Corder (1973: 226) is right in claiming that difficulty is "a matter of subjective judgement". He (ibid.) has added that it is related to motivation which is generally regarded as "a powerful factor in SLA" (Ellis, 1985: 119). Unfortunately, difficulty as a matter of the learner's subjective judgement remains unexamined. Some researchers, however, allude to the role of difficulty as an affective factor in L2 learning. Horwitz (1987: 123), for example, argues, "Student judgements about the difficulty of language learning are critical to the development of students' expectations for and commitment to language learning". Schachter's (1974) research is important, for it provides a new perspective on difficulty: i.e., difficulty is treated as an affective factor that can possibly influence learner attitudes and performance in L2 learning. Her study demonstrated that learners avoided using a particular structure just because they found it difficult. Similarly, Tajino (1995) reported that avoidance phenomena, which meant in his study not giving any answers to questions, took place due to difficulty perceived. He found that the avoidance phenomenon highly correlated with the perception of difficulty on an EFL gap-filling exercise regardless of gender or grade at the secondary school level. These results are compatible with Horwitz (1987) and Ausubel (1968). That is to say, the perception of difficulty can be "discouraging and cause [the learners] to make only minimal efforts" (Horwitz, ibid.: 123) or "promote task avoidance" (Ausubel, ibid.: 326). A negative role played by perceived difficulty in L2 learning was also reported by Matsuhata (see Hatori and Matsuhata, 1980). The data from 1,851 Japanese junior high school students in his survey showed that the perception of difficulty was the primary reason for their negative attitudes toward learning EFL. Other studies have corroborated his findings (e.g. Nakayama, 1986; Takimoto et al., 1994). Gardner (1985) argues that such attitudes are crucial for developing and sustaining motivation that can lead to success in L2 learning. Ellis (1985), in fact, claims that motivation can be developed by learning tasks carefully designed, and therefore (1993) suggests that classroom teachers should be concerned with decisions about whether or not tasks can motivate learners. According to him, these decisions are perhaps more relevant to the classroom practitioners than Gardner's (ibid.) distinction between instrumental and integrative motivation.

Learner perception of difficulty (LPD) and task matching

It is generally assumed that matching work to learners entails "giving them those tasks which optimally sustain motivation, confidence and progress in learning" (Desforges, 1985: 92). It can be said that a task is mismatched if, due to its perceived difficulty, the task does not motivate the learners. The above discussion has given good reason to claim that learner perception of difficulty (LPD) should be considered in matching tasks or designing tasks. Prabhu (1987) comments on this issue:

> ... learners should not be able to meet the challenge too easily but should be able to meet it with some effort. This is not just a matter of the teacher's assessment of the learners' ability; it is a matter of the learners' own perceptions, too. If a task looks very easy to learners, they expect no sense of achievement from success in it and are likely to be less than keen to attempt it. If, on the other hand, the task looks so difficult that they feel sure they will fail in it, they are likely to be reluctant to make an effort at all. A task should, ideally, look difficult but attainable to learners. (p. 56)

Unfortunately, we can hardly make a task look difficult but attainable to learners until more information is available about LPD. Research from social psychology suggests that the level of task difficulty should depend upon the strength of an individual learner's need for achievement (Atkinson, 1957), where achievement behaviour is explained in terms of two conflicting tendencies (i.e. approach and avoidance). They would argue that, to encourage a learner to try a task, the task should be of intermediate difficulty if the learner is highly motivated to achieve; since an extremely easy task has no challenge and no value for success and therefore will not motivate him or her, and because success is unlikely, an extremely difficult task may not motivate him or her either. If, on the other hand, the learner has a high fear of failure, the task should appear either extremely easy (because success is more likely) or extremely difficult (because it can provide an excuse for not being successful). However, again, since little is known about LPD, how is it possible for us to make a task appear difficult or easy to the learner?

Research Questions

The present study addresses the following research questions:

1. Are there any similarities in the order of learner perception of difficulty?
2. Can learner performance be a reliable indicator for identifying learner perception of difficulty?

These questions were chosen for their pedagogical significance. For example, if there were a common order among learner perceptions of difficulty, teachers would be able to develop tasks that recognize such perceptions, and perhaps utilize them in a constructive way. The second question was concerned with how teachers can identify LPD. It was also meant to add further evidence to the body of research that discusses difficulty in terms of performance (i.e. errors/mistakes).

The study

Subjects

Fifty-six freshmen, who had been studying EFL in junior and senior high schools in Japan for six years (three to five 50-minute classes per week), participated in this study: 28 students were from a junior college EFL class and the other 28 students from a university EFL class. Their academic records showed that the University Group were higher in English proficiency than the

Junior College Group.[1)]

Procedures

The subjects in each group were given twenty minutes to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire had two types of English grammar tests designed by the Tokyo Gakugei University Interlanguage Development Research Project Team (see Appendix I).[2)] One type called the J-type test requires learners to select, from six tenses/aspects, the proper English tense that corresponds to the meaning of the underlined part of a Japanese sentence, while the other, the E-type test, asks them to complete an English sentence with the proper verb tense selected from six choices, using context to determine the correct tense/aspect. On each type of test in the present study, three different questions were given to test their understanding of one particular English tense, the 'present tense'. Two questions (one on the present perfect and one on the past tense) were added to the questionnaire, so that they would not be able to determine which questions were being researched and the questionnaire itself would be more like an ordinary quiz. The order of presenting these five questions was randomized according to the Random Number Table. Immediately after answering each question, the learners were asked to indicate how difficult or easy the question was for them on a Likert-type 5-point scale. They were then required to choose and rank two out of the five questions as the most difficult and second most difficult and another two as the easiest and second easiest by referring to the data from their completed scales. These procedures made it possible to establish their LPD-orders for each group. This paper, however, is concerned only with responses to the three present tense questions on each test.

Data analyses

Data obtained from each learner's ranking of perceived question-difficulty was used to establish the representative LPD-order for each group of learners. The order was obtained by counting the number of the learners who perceived a particular question to be relatively difficult; either the most difficult or the second most difficult (i.e. ranked first or second) among the five questions,[3)] and then their LPD-orders and inaccuracy-orders were compared with each other. Performance

1) This was also confirmed by the results of the t-tests for their scores on both tests: i.e., the null hypothesis was rejected on both the J-type ($t = 2.53$, $p < .05$) and the E-type ($t = 3.85$, $p < .001$).

2) These questions were borrowed from the Tokyo Gakugei University's Project which was notable in Japan for both its size and wide geographical coverage. This test was chosen on the basis of the assumption that it was both valid and reliable.

3) Unlike Tran-Thi-Chau's (1975) study, where an overall student perception order was established based on the mean scores of student 'ratings' on the Likert scales (i.e. by simply summing up the scores on the scale), the 'ranking' data was used in this study; because it is possible, as pointed out by Alderson (1992: 5), that "one person's '3' may mean something quite different from another person's". In other words, each learner could, and presumably did, rate each question according to his or her own definition and degree of difficulty. These ratings were obtained from a scale which can itself be perceived in different ways by the learners. For this reason, it was more reliable to use the ranking (not rating) data to establish the relative LPD-order for each group. For a review of Tran's study, see Tajino (1996).

data was, as in Yule et al's (1985) study on confidence, grouped into response phenomena including, 'difficult-(but)-accurate response', 'difficult-(and)-inaccurate response', 'easy-(and)-accurate response', and 'easy-(but)-inaccurate response'.[4)]

Results and discussion

Research Question 1. Are there any similarities in the order of learner perception of difficulty?

This question was addressed by comparing the LPD-orders from two groups: the Junior College Group and the University Group. Of five questions (Questions A to E) on each type of test, the questions dealing with the same, present tense were Questions A, B, and E (J-type) and Questions A, C, and D (E-type). These orders are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1
LPD-orders from two groups

	J-type Questions			*E-type* Questions		
Groups	A	B	E	A	C	D
Junior College	3	1	2	3	2	1
University	3	1	2	3	2	1

As seen above, the representative LPD-orders from those two groups were exactly the same on each test. This should receive attention since the matching probability for these two LPD-orders is quite low, only 16.7% (i.e. 1/6) each. In fact, almost 90% of each group, 24/28 (Junior College) and 25/28 (University), agreed that Question B was more difficult than Question A on the J-type test; and almost 70% or more (19/28 and 23/28 respectively) agreed that Question D was more difficult than Question A on the E-type test. These results suggest that learners may perceive task difficulty in similar ways regardless of achievement.

Research Question 2. Can learner performance be a reliable indicator for identifying learner perception of difficulty?

This question was addressed by two different approaches, as mentioned above: one by comparing the LPD-order with the inaccurate performance order (i.e. inaccuracy-order) from each group, and one by discussing Yule et al's response phenomena.

LPD-orders vs. inaccuracy-orders

Table 2 below shows both LPD-orders and inaccuracy-orders from the two groups of learners. As can be seen in the table, these orders corresponded only in one case (i.e. University, J-type).

4) The top two most difficult out of the five questions perceived by each learner were classified as 'difficult', the middle as 'neutral', and the two easiest questions as 'easy'.

Table 2
LPD-orders and Inaccuracy-orders

	J-type Questions			*E-type* Questions		
Groups	A	B	E	A	C	D
1) Junior College						
LPD-orders	3	1	2	3	2	1
Inaccuracy-orders	1	2	3	3	1	2
2) University						
LPD-orders	3	1	2	3	2	1
Inaccuracy-orders	3	1	2	3	1	1

Table 3a (J-type)
Relationship between LPD and performance

	Junior College Questions			University Questions		
Response	A	B	E	A	B	E
DF/AC	2	6	6	1	7	3
ES/AC	8	4	9	19	5	16
NT/AC	0	2	1	2	4	2
DF/INA	3	11	8	3	10	5
ES/INA	11	1	4	2	1	2
NT/INA	4	4	0	1	1	0
Total	28	28	28	28	28	28

Table 3b (E-type)
Relationship between LPD and performance

	Junior College Questions			University Questions		
Response	A	C	D	A	C	D
DF/AC	6	5	3	8	8	9
ES/AC	10	1	1	11	2	1
NT/AC	2	0	3	4	2	2
DF/INA	3	10	15	1	8	12
ES/INA	6	7	4	2	5	0
NT/INA	1	5	2	2	3	4
Total	28	28	28	28	28	28

DF = Difficult, ES = Easy, NT = Neutral, AC = Accurate, INA = Inaccurate

Statistics showed that the LPD-order did not significantly correlate with the inaccuracy-order in the other three cases. The results suggest that we can hardly rely on learner inaccurate performance to identify LPD.

Response phenomena

Tables 3a & 3b, which indicate the number of learners in each type of response, will help better understand the relationship between LPD and performance. Of course, whether learner performance is accurate (AC) or inaccurate (INA), the learner has an equal opportunity to judge the question to be difficult (DF) or easy (ES) (see Note 4)).

The above tables show how it is possible for learners to choose a correct answer while perceiving the question to be difficult (i.e. difficult/accurate response), and a wrong answer while perceiving it to be easy (i.e. easy/inaccurate response). For example, in the Junior College Group, Question B on the J-type was perceived as relatively difficult by 50% of those who got it right (6/12), and Question A was perceived as relatively easy by 61% of those who got it wrong (11/18).

This was also the case with the University Group on the J-type test, where 44% of the accurate performance for Question B were perceived as relatively difficult (7/16) and 33% of the inaccurate performance for Questions A were perceived as relatively easy (2/6). The E-type test saw similar results: e.g., Question C was perceived as relatively difficult by almost 70% or more of those who got it right (i.e. Junior College Group, 83% (5/6) and University Group, 67% (8/12)); and though they got it wrong, Question A was perceived as relatively easy by 60% (6/10) of the Junior College group and 40% (2/5) of the University Group. The data has thus provided more reasons to warn against an over-reliance on learner performance in identifying learner difficulty or LPD. It is clearly shown that questions dealing with the same item (i.e. the present tense) resulted in different response phenomena. Although the data's sample size might not be enough to allow for generalizations, these findings are sufficient for us to claim, specifically from a pedagogic perspective, that the notion of learner difficulty in L2 learning ought to be reconsidered.

Conclusion

The results of the present study show that the LPD-orders from different groups of learners were identical and that learner performance could not be a reliable indicator of learner perception of difficulty or difficulty as an affective factor. These results have, at least, the following pedagogical implications. First, the finding that difficulty was perceived in similar orders, regardless of achievement level, would make it possible to grade tasks according to the relative degree of perceived task difficulty such that, other things being equal, in order to develop and sustain learner motivation, a task which is perceived as being relatively easy could be introduced before a task which is perceived as being relatively difficult. Second, the data demonstrates that questions dealing with the same item resulted in different response phenomena. This suggests that, like a meal at a restaurant, a language task, depending on its visual appeal, may sharpen or dull the learners' appetite, even if the language material is the same. Teachers should recognize that they hold a powerful influence over learner perceptions, attitudes and motivation (Bar-Tal, 1982). Finally, the finding that 'no error' did not always mean 'no difficulty' (i.e. difficult/accurate response) suggests that teachers should pay more attention to the process of L2 learning or learning strategies which are likely to affect L2 learning.

Future research on a larger scale should focus on qualitative data as well as quantitative so that we may be able to answer questions arising from the present study, such as "Why does learner performance not always reflect learner perception of difficulty?" and "What are the implications of different types of response phenomena for learner motivation?". Addressing these questions will help us to better understand what learner difficulty is, and, in turn, to better assist learners in terms of motivation.

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Appendix I

Test Questions: J-type and E-type

J-type

A. 私は毎月母に手紙を書いている。

1) write 2) wrote 3) will write 4) am writing 5) was writing 6) have written

B. きまって9月になるとひどい台風が日本にやってくる。

1) come 2) came 3) will come 4) are coming 5) were coming 6) have come

C. 私は子供のころ、夕方おそくまで外で遊んだ。

1) play 2) played 3) will play 4) am playing 5) was playing 6) have played

D. そのテストの結果については、まだ何も聞いていません。

1) don't hear 2) didn't hear 3) will not hear 4) am not hearing 5) wasn't hearing 6) haven't heard

E. 私はロシア語がわかります。

1) understand 2) understood 3) will understand 4) am understanding 5) was understanding 6) have understood

E-type

A. A: How do you usually come to school?
B: I ( ).

1) walk 2) am walking 3) walked 4) was walking 5) will walk 6) have walked

B. A: Have you ever visited Hawaii?
B: Yes. I ( ) there last summer.

1) visit 2) am visiting 3) visited 4) was visiting 5) will visit 6) have visited

C. A: I had an English test.
B: How did you do?
A: I ( ). Not too well.

1) don't know 2) am not knowing 3) didn't know 4) was not knowing 5) will not know 6) haven't known

D. I have walked all the way from the station.
I ( ) tired.

1) am 2) am being 3) was 4) was being 5) will be 6) have been

E. A: Are you going back to your country?
B: Yes. I ( ) here in Japan for two years.

1) stay 2) am staying 3) stayed 4) was staying 5) will stay 6) have stayed