Defining the rate of learning, ultimate attainment, and near-nativelikeness in late second language speech: An empirical study

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The current study examines the linguistic qualities of adult second language (L2) learners’ speech as a function of increased experience—operationalized as length of residence (LOR)—and then compares with those of monolingual native speakers of English. Spontaneous speech was elicited via a timed picture description task from 182 Japanese learners of English with diverse LOR profiles (0 months to 44 years) and 10 native baselines. Linguistically trained raters analyzed speech samples for segmentals (accuracy in vowels and consonants), prosody (adequate and varied intonation), fluency (optimal speech rate) and lexicogrammar (appropriate usage in contexts).

According to the results of the piecewise regression analyses, whereas LOR significantly predicted all areas of L2 proficiency, such experience-proficiency links became strongest when different cut-off points were included for segmentals (15.96 years), intonation (4.62 years), speech rate (4.20 years), and lexicogrammar (1.68 years). By submitting the participants’ proficiency scores to the hierarchical cluster and ANOVA analyses, they were categorized into four groups: Beginner Learners (n = 73), Intermediate Learners (n = 87), Advanced Learners (n = 22) and Native Speakers (n = 10) with their group mean scores different from one another with large effects (d > 1).

Taken together, the findings of the cross-sectional data shed some light on the interlanguage development, ultimate attainment and near-nativelikeness of adult L2 speech learning. First, L2 learners may continue to improve L2 oral ability over time through immersion in an L2 speaking environment, but with their rate of learning varied according to linguistic domains (pronunciation entails longer learning time than lexicogrammar). Second, whereas certain L2 learners may attain relatively high proficiency levels (LOR > 10 years), their linguistic qualities could be substantially different from those of inexperienced Japanese learners as well as native speakers.

Keywords: Rate of learning, Ultimate attainment, L2 speech, Length of residence.