Vocabulary Learning and Instruction
Volume 1, Issue 1, August 2012
http://vli-journal.org

A Study of Learners' Intuitions Behind the Use of Utterance Verbs in English

Yoshiaki Sato and Aaron Batty
Keio University
doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.7820/vli.v01.1.sato.batty

Abstract

Verbs of utterance are some of the most fundamental verbs in the English language, yet their usage patterns are exceptionally diverse. Learners of English should be able to use these words correctly and comfortably, but without an understanding of their core meanings acquisition of their various patterns of use can be daunting. The present research investigates the differences between English learners' and native speakers' intuitions regarding the utterance verbs "speak," "talk," "say," and "tell." The participants were 80 users of English in four proficiency groups (Low, Mid, High, and native). The participants were polled via questionnaire on their intuitions regarding various uses of the four utterance verbs. Data were analyzed and compared with descriptive statistics and *t* tests. Although the intuitions of learners of increasing proficiency increasingly resembled those of NS, the verbs "speak" and "talk" posed special problems, indicating a lack of understanding of these verbs' core meanings. Language educators are recommended to pay particular attention to these verbs' more idiomatic uses (e.g. "talk politics") to address these deficiencies.

Keywords: utterance verbs; semantically-interrelated verbs; division of labor; constructional ranges; core meaning; lexical hypothesis; lexical acquisition; systematic teaching.

1 Background

Utterance verbs such as "speak," "talk," "say," and "tell" are among the list of English lexical items generally expected to be mastered in the early stages of learning, even for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. All these four utterance verbs are among the first 1000 items in the *General Service List* (West, 1953). It may not be as easy to assume, however, that EFL learners will be able to use and comprehend, with clear distinction and to their fullest, each of those semantically interrelated words.

When using utterance verbs in English, it is essential that the user of the language judge whether the content of an utterance can be the direct object of the verb (e.g. "She said '*no*'"), whether two noun phrases representing a person and the content of the utterance can come in a row right after the verb (e.g. "I told *you the truth*"), or whether the verb should be used as an intransitive one with the help of a prepositional phrase (e.g. "I want to talk *with* you *over* the matter"). These kinds of constructions vary from one verb to another; consequently, in most cases it is a formidable task for EFL learners to master these constructions (Hornby, 1975).

Please cite this article as: Sato, Y. & Batty, A. (2012). A study of learners' intuitions behind the use of utterance verbs in English. *Vocabulary Learning and Instruction, 1*(1), 29–36. doi: 10.7820/vli.v01.1.sato.batty

Following this line of thought, in learning the basic utterance verbs it is critical that learners grasp the essence of those words, that is, the lexical core of each verb, which can explain and make explicit the division of labor among them. By mastering the core of each of the semantically interrelated verbs in the conceptual field of utterance, and learning to differentiate between those verbs in reference to the core of each verb, learners will be able to learn the correspondence between the concept and its referents, as well as the constructional ranges of each verb, relating to and differentiating from each other. Here, it can become an empirical enquiry as to how learners internalize these verbs in comparison with NSs. Indeed, there has not been much empirical research done to ascertain how well these utterance verbs are learned by Japanese EFL learners, and where they tend to face difficulty with words of this type. Thus, this research aims at answering with quantitative data to the following research questions.

2 Research Questions

1. What proves to be difficult for adult Japanese EFL learners, when they learn the utterance verbs "speak," "talk," "say," and "tell?"
2. Are there differences between learners at different proficiency levels in their degree of utterance verb acquisition?
3. Are there differences in intuition between learners and NSs behind the use of these utterance verbs?

3 Method

A questionnaire comprising 29 items on usages of the utterance verbs was administered to three learner groups of different proficiency levels: High (Japanese university students who had studied in an English-speaking country or area; $n = 8$), Mid (Japanese university students who had been studying English only in Japan; $n = 36$), and Low (Japanese high school students; $n = 22$). Examples of items are shown in the Appendix. Data were also gathered from NS ($n = 14$), who agreed to answer the same questionnaire via an attached file through e-mail.

4 Results and Discussion

Out of the 44 Japanese university students who answered the questionnaire, eight were returnees who had studied in an English-speaking country or area (USA, UK, Australia, and Hong Kong) for more than 12 months (mean: 4 years and 7 months). Comparing the average scores on Part 1 among the eight returnees, the other 36 university students, and the 22 high-school students indicated that the division of the learner participants into three proficiency groups would be meaningful. Table 1 shows the average scores on Part 1 for these three learner groups and the group of native speakers (NS) (the full score being 20). Table 2 shows the rates of the items answered correctly by each of the four groups.

The NS group scored 100% on 17 out of the 20 questions, which seems sufficient to show that all the items in this section are natural expressions in English, and that they are acceptable for most NS. The High group (returnees) had higher

rates than the Mid (university) and Low (high school) learner groups in general, with all eight returnees scoring 100% on items 8 and 15–19. However, the returnees' scores went down on items 1, 6, 13, and 20, all of which call for "talk" as the right answer, and also on items 5 and 11, both of which call for "speak" as the correct answer. Remarkably, on item 5, the group of returnees scored lower than the other two learner groups. Figure 1 shows the percentages of correct answers for each of the four participant groups on the items focusing on each of the four utterance verbs.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Total Scores on Part 1

	Mean	SD
NS ($n=14$)	19.79	0.43
High ($n=8$)	14.75	3.41
Mid ($n=36$)	10.50	2.84
Low ($n=22$)	7.95	3.33

Table 2. Percentage of Correct Answers to Part 1 Gap-Fill Questions

Sentence	NS (%) ($n=14$)	High (%) ($n=8$)	Mid (%) ($n=36$)	Low (%) ($n=22$)
(1) I couldn't *talk* her into coming with us	100	50	36	41
(2) He *spoke* up for the union's strike	100	75	56	23
(3) I got caught because somebody *told* on me	100	75	39	32
(4) What does that sign *say* over there?	100	88	64	59
(5) The newspaper editorial *spoke* highly of the new mayor	93	13	36	27
(6) Never *talk* back to your mother	100	38	28	23
(7) What did you *say* your name was?	100	88	58	45
(8) Don't *tell* me a lie	100	100	89	59
(9) Carl *said* to Linda, "I'll be back by seven"	93	63	72	55
(10) I can *tell* by the smell that it's garlic and basil	100	83	64	41
(11) His actions *speak* for his true feelings	100	50	19	32
(12) I finally *talked* her out of a new computer	100	88	28	36
(13) The receptionist *talked* me through the application form	100	38	6	18
(14) It is time for all of us to *speak* out against racism	100	75	69	36
(15) I wouldn't *say* no to a beer right now	100	100	86	36
(16) It's easy to *tell* the expensive wine from the cheap one	100	100	74	27
(17) *Speak* up! We can't hear you clearly	100	100	75	59
(18) My brother *told* me not to drive so fast in the rain	100	100	69	73
(19) The tour guide *said* to be back on the bus in 15 minutes	93	100	58	50
(20) Now you're *talking*!	100	38	19	23

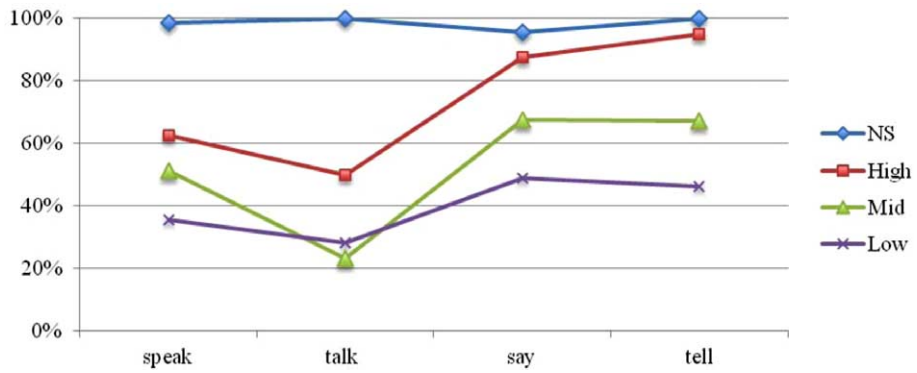

Figure 1. Percentage of correct answers on gap-fill questions grouped by utterance verb.

Additionally, *t*-tests were performed on the gap-fill responses in order to investigate the differences between the learner groups and the NSs; all the results were significant, except for the uses of "say" and "tell" by the High group (see Table 3).

Table 3. Results of *t* Tests Between Learner Groups and NS ($n = 14$)

		Speak	Talk	Say	Tell
High ($n = 8$)	*t*	3.47*	5.40*	1.43	1.53
	df	7.27	7.00	9.68	7.00
Mid ($n = 36$)	*t*	11.76*	21.79*	5.90*	8.37*
	df	43.35	35.00	47.60	35.00
Low ($n = 22$)	*t*	11.60*	16.72*	7.43*	9.03*
	df	24.01	21.00	26.86	21.00

*$p \leq 0.01$.

Between "speak" and "talk," the lower scores were on items calling for "talk." Even for the returnees, the six items on which they scored lowest (1, 5, 6, 11, 13, and 20) included as many as four items that called for "talk" as the right answer (1, 6, 13, and 20). These tendencies are not at all observed with the NS.

One may wonder what makes it so difficult to acquire the usages of "talk." For one thing, the participants may not have learned the use of idiomatic expressions such as "talk back" (6), "talk someone into (doing) something" (1), "talk someone through something" (13). For another, "talk" is generally taught as or supposed to be an intransitive verb, and thus this knowledge, whether it is explicit or implicit, might have served as a restraint against selecting this verb where it can act transitively (1 and 13). This might explain, for instance, why more than half of the learner participants (50% of the returnees, 81% of the middle level and 58% of the low level, respectively) opted for the wrong answer "tell" on item 13. In contrast to "talk," "tell" is usually taught as or supposed to be a transitive verb, which can take a person as its object.

This verb selection mechanism may remind one of "syntactic bootstrapping" in L1 acquisition (Karmiloff-Smith, 1992; Landau & Gleitman, 1985; Naigles & Hoff-Ginsberg, 1995) in that learners judge the use of a verb based on its syntactic properties. However, "syntactic bootstrapping" is a strategy for taking advantage of the syntactic information of a lexical item to acquire the meaning of the word,

resulting in the integration between the meaning and the construction ranges available to the word. In contrast, the strategy that some of our learner participants might have adopted would have been a mere dependence on the constructional pattern of a verb, isolated from its lexical core. Admitting that an L2 lemma contains both the semantic and the syntactic sides (Jiang, 2000; Levelt, 1989), there would be few correct judgments concerning the constructions available to that L2 lemma if such assessments were based merely on syntactic patterns lacking any kind of inherent connection to the lexical core of the word in question. Such overdependence on constructional patterns results in learners failing to learn the meanings as well as the construction ranges for unknown words.

Along this line of discussion, Levelt (1989) notes "nothing in the speaker's message will by itself trigger a particular syntactic form. ... There must always be mediating lexical items, triggered by the message." This "lexical hypothesis" was meant to explain a part of the mechanism for speaking, but it also has relevance here in English as a second language (ESL) lexical acquisition. This hypothesis suggests that a syntactic pattern of a word will not come by itself, but rather it arises as a result of using the word in a certain construction that will help to match it to some part of the message to be conveyed. If this is the case, it then follows that learners are advised to refer to the semantic side, i.e. the lexical core of a word (especially, a verb in our case) before they expect to master possible constructions using the word.

All the discussion here seems to suggest that in learning to use such basic utterance verbs as "speak," "talk," "say," and "tell," there lies some difficulty in lexical acquisition which may not be simply overcome by exposing learners to a sufficient quantity of authentic L2 input for a certain period of time. To overcome such difficulty would also require a systematic teaching or learning strategy based on the core of each of the verbs.

A brief look at the results for Part 3 of the questionnaire will make the point made above clearer. In Part 3, the NS tended to give a clear "yes" or "no" answer to a given collocation containing one of the four utterance verbs. All the learner groups lacked such a clear-cut response tendency. Following is a brief discussion focusing on "talk + noun phrase." Figure 2 shows a rough visual scale image of the acceptance rates of the four groups (NS, High, Mid, and Low) for the collocation patterns of "talk."

As has already been pointed out, "talk" is generally used as an intransitive verb, but it can also work transitively, with an object following it. Even in that case, such noun phrases will be accepted as long as they do not run counter to the core of the verb. The core of "talk" is "verbally interact," and the typical deciding factor will be verbal negotiation or interaction. Therefore, such noun phrases as are capable of representing a sort of space for verbal negotiation or interaction will have the semantically legitimate right to come immediately after "talk." This explains collocations like "talk business," "talk baseball," "talk nonsense," and "talk religion." Indeed, most of the native participants accepted these collocations as natural. In this usage, the noun phrase stands for a kind of interaction space for verbal negotiation, but not for any space belonging exclusively to one of the two in dialogue. This is why "your family" or "our problem" would not be suitable for collocating with "talk." To use these noun phrases after this verb, one must convert them into prepositional phrases like "about your family" or "about our problem."

However, the learner groups, including the returnees, had a number of individuals who wrongly accepted such collocations as acceptable. The correct possible collocations of "talk," on the other hand, were missed by most of the learners.

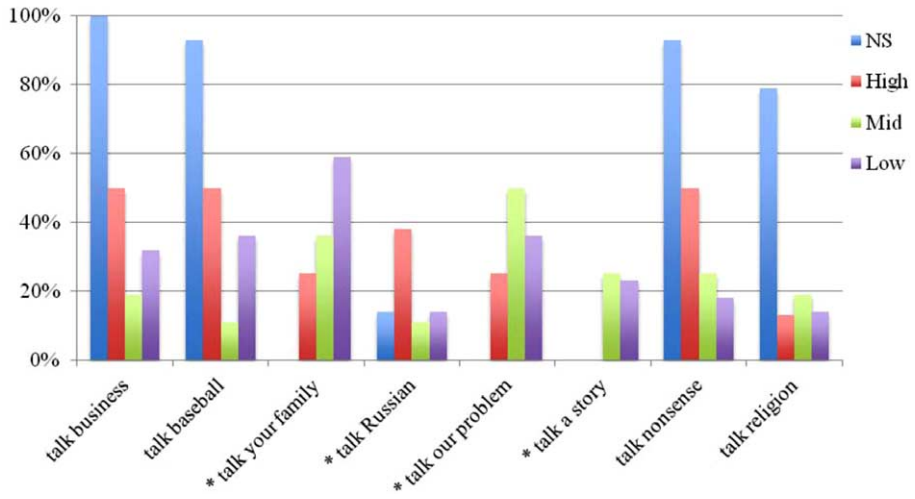

Figure 2. Collocation acceptance rates of "talk + NP."

5 Conclusion

This research aimed to address empirical questions of what points are difficult for adult Japanese EFL learners when learning the four basic utterance verbs "speak," "talk," "say," and "tell"; whether there is any difference in how well they manage to learn these four verbs according to their proficiency level (learning stage); and to what degree learners' mental lexicons of these four utterance verbs differ from NSs' intuitions. The data gathered and analyzed showed clearly a problematic situation shared by all of the learner groups, including the group consisting of the eight returnees, which was not observable in the NS group. It was suggested that for Japanese EFL learners, among the four utterance verbs, "talk" and "speak" may be more difficult to learn than "say" and "tell." "Talk," especially, caused a number of problem situations. Possible scenarios suggested to explain this include "the idiom effect" as well as the effect of teaching or learning methods (strategies) that depend exclusively on the syntactic properties (i.e. whether a given verb is transitive or intransitive) for making judgments about verbal constructions. This leads to the pedagogical implication of this research. That is, it is advisable to devise ways to teach the constructional ranges of a verb based on its lexical core, rather than instructing the syntactic information of the verb, isolated from its core meaning. Work is continuing on this project, and a follow-up study with a larger number of participants should be able to shed further light on this issue.

References

Hornby, A.S. (1975). *A guide to patterns and usage in English.* London: Oxford University Press.

Jiang, N. (2000). Lexical representation and development in a second language. *Applied Linguistics*, *21*(1), 47–77. doi:10.1093/applin/21.1.47

Karmiloff-Smith, A. (1992). Beyond modularity: A developmental perspective on cognitive science. *International Journal of Language Communication Disorders, 29,* 95–105. doi:10.3109/13682829409041485

Landau, B., & Gleitman, L.R. (1985). *Language and experience: Evidence from the blind child.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Levelt, W.J.M. (1989). *Speaking: From intention to articulation.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Naigles, L.R., & Hoff-Ginsberg, E. (1995). Input to verb learning: Evidence for the plausibility of syntactic bootstrapping. *Developmental Psychology*, *31*(5), 827–837. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.31.5.827

West, M. (1953). *A general service list of English words.* London: Longmans, Green & Co.

Appendix: Examples of Parts 1–3 of the questionnaire.

Appendix

Part 1 [gap-filling; 20 items]

I couldn't [ ] her into coming with us.

1. speak 2. talk 3. say 4. tell

Part 2 [acceptance judgment; 5 items]

(Meaning that money helps you out in most hard situations) Money [ ].

	not acceptable			most acceptable
speaks	0 ----------	1 ----------	2 ----------	3 ---------- 4
talks	0 ----------	1 ----------	2 ----------	3 ---------- 4
says	0 ----------	1 ----------	2 ----------	3 ---------- 4
tells	0 ----------	1 ----------	2 ----------	3 ---------- 4

Part 3 [collocation judgment; 4 items]

talk + [noun or noun phrase]

business	baseball	your family	Russian
our problem	a story	nonsense	religion