Influential Factors on the production of English /θ/ by Japanese Learners of English  
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It has been suggested that English /θ/ is highly problematic for Japanese-speaking learners of English, because /θ/ is absent from their Japanese. Due to this fact, it is often the case that Japanese learners assimilate /θ/ to their native category, /s/ (/s/-substitution). Although a large number of previous studies have shown this fact, the exact factors which influence /s/-substitution have not fully investigated. In this study, the linguistic and sociolinguistic factors which trigger /s/-substitution were examined by examining the production of English /θ/ in various contexts produced by native speakers of Japanese.

There are five linguistic factors adopted in this study: Position in Words; Stress; Preceding Environment; Following Environment; and Proximity of Similar Sounds. Besides, one sociolinguistic factor was also taken into consideration: Formality. This factor was examined by using two kinds of methods of collecting learners’ production of /θ/: a read-aloud task of words in carrier sentences I say on the tape (formal task); a question-and-answer session on various kinds of topics (informal task). In order to decide which factors influenced the production of /θ/ significantly, a statistic program called GoldVarb X was used.

According to the result of this study, /s/-substitution was more likely to occur word-initially, in unstressed syllable, after pause/vowel, with /s/ in proximity, and in more informal speech. Therefore, the most difficult word for Japanese-speaking English learners would be the one which contains both /θ/ in word-initial unstressed syllable and /s/, such as thesaurus. This result can be explained both by second language acquisition theory and phonological theory. Furthermore, other than /s/-substitution, [t] was also observed in some words, especially in word-final syllable (e.g. beneath, both). This might be due to the incomplete acquisition of the place of articulation of /θ/. From these results, pedagogical indication might be possible to make: in teaching the pronunciation of /θ/, activities should target problematic contexts where /s/-substitution is more frequent.