

Summary of Research: Elicited Imitation as a Language Assessment Instrument

Description

Elicited Imitation (EI) is a testing method in which participants hear an utterance in the target language and are prompted to repeat the utterance as accurately as possible. It is built on working (short term) memory research that shows that the storage capacity of unrelated items in the working memory is limited. If the participant is completely unfamiliar with the language, each syllable of the utterance will count towards the limited capacity, reducing the participant's ability to accurately repeat utterances longer than a few syllables. However, a participant can increase what is stored in the working memory by "chunking" individual syllables together into larger units of meaning (Cowan et al., 1992; Cowan 2001; Miller, 1956). More recent research in language processing has shown that as a learner becomes more proficient in a language, she increases her ability to piece together individual syllables into larger "chunks" of meaning through her expanded knowledge of grammar and vocabulary (Baddeley et al., 1998; Ellis, 2001; Gathercole & Baddeley, 1993; Speciale et al., 2004). In this way, Elicited Imitation can reliably approximate a learner's proficiency level by measuring the accuracy of the repetition of items of various lengths and complexity (Bley-Vroman & Chaudron, 1994; Burdis, 2014; Chaudron & Russell, 1990; Erlam, 2009; Vinther, 2002).

Brief History

EI originated in the academic literature in the 1960s. The original research was published using EI as a research method to (a) better understand the language development and acquisition process of American children learning English as their first language (Fraser, Bellugi, & Brown, 1963; see Lust, Flynn, & Foley, 1996; Slobin & Welsh, 1973 for reviews) and (b) assess first language disorders in children (Dailey & Boxx, 1979; Lee 1970; Menyuk, 1964). Naiman (1974) was the first to apply this methodology to second language acquisition research, but he encountered some resistance by those questioning EI's validity (Hamayan et al., 1977; Mcdade, Simpson, & Lamb, 1982; Smith, 1973; see Vinther 2002 for a review). It wasn't until a couple decades later that EI began to be recognized as a valid instrument to approximate oral proficiency of English (Bley-Vroman and Chaudron, 1994; Ellis, 2005, 2006; Erlam, 2006, 2009; Graham et al., 2008; Tomita, Suzuki, & Jessop, 2009).

Validity

EI has been shown to correlate highly with other standard measures of oral proficiency in multiple languages, achieving correlations as high as 0.94 (Burdis, 2014; Cook et al., 2011; Erlam, 2009; Graham et al., 2008; Graham, McGhee, & Millard, 2010; Millard, 2011). It achieves such high correlations because it is assumed to be reconstructive in nature, that is the participant must process and reconstruct the prompt—not just rotely repeat it. The participant cannot accurately reconstruct and thus reproduce longer, more complex items if the participant lacks the proper grammatical and lexical competence in her interlanguage (Tomita, Suzuki, & Jessop, 2009; Vinther, 2002).

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