Individual differences in L2 learners’ ability to process determiners online

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Several studies have demonstrated that L2 learners can use gender-marked determiners to predict upcoming information in nativelike ways, and that this ability depends on learners’ proficiency and L1 characteristics (e.g. Lew-Williams & Fernald, 2010; Dussias et al., 2013). This study investigated what it takes to come to process L2 determines in nativelike ways and the extent to which individuals differ in this ability.

Fifty adult Dutch native speakers received brief, auditory exposure to a language based on Fijian, which included a determiner-noun agreement structure. They were asked to learn the language by looking at images and listening to phrases and sentences describing the images. There was no explicit focus on grammar. Determiner processing was measured using the visual world paradigm with eye-tracking: In every trial, learners saw two images on the screen and heard a determiner – adjective – noun phrase. Their task was to choose the correct image. Learners who could process determiners online were expected to look at the correct image already while hearing the determiner and adjective but before hearing the noun.

The results showed that learners as a group could process determiners online, but substantial individual differences were found. Awareness of the gender distinction in the language was found to be a prerequisite for online processing. Only learners who reported this awareness showed online processing. There were different degrees of awareness. Some learners who were aware of the gender distinction also reported that determiners were useful during the test. In addition to online processing, these learners also gained a speed advantage, which suggests strategic processing.

This study suggests that adult learners can develop the ability to process L2 determiners online after brief exposure, but that awareness of at least gender distinction is crucial. In addition, some learners seem to exploit this awareness consciously during the test.

Keywords: individual differences, online L2 processing, gender-marked determiners, eye-tracking.