Determining the extent to which L1 learner choices influence the L2: exploring semantic and syntactic choices.

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This study tests Jiang’s (2004) 3-stage model of second language (L2) vocabulary acquisition. Jiang observed continued first language (L1) [Korean] semantic mediation in L2 processing among advanced L2 speakers. We hypothesise, however, that mediation might depend on the developing proficiency of the L2 learner and the relationship between L1 and L2.

We explored the extent to which L1 background influences the processing of semantics and syntax in L2 (English). Three different L1 subject groups (n=30 per group): English, European, and Japanese. L1 European speakers were tested because their L1 shares the same word order as the L2, in contrast to L1 Japanese speakers.

Two reaction time (RT) experiments were conducted to determine whether strings of words accurately reflect English syntax or semantics. Using the L1 English subject group as a control, we compared the choices made by our three groups. We also examined the L2 (English) learners’ vocabulary size.

Overall the RTs were slower for incorrect syntactic word strings. The syntax RTs of the European and Japanese groups showed differences between correct and incorrect strings. However, the Japanese group showed no difference between SVO correct and incorrect strings. The semantic RTs did not differ between the L2 groups but the control group was faster. Initial findings suggest that L2 word order judgement latencies are mediated more by L1 word order; however, L2 semantic judgement latencies seem less mediated by differences in L1 word order. The findings are discussed in light of Jiang’s model and how the role of L1 word order is closer related to L2 syntactic processing than semantic processing.

References


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