The Elicited Imitation (EI) test between input processing and rote repetition

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Much of the literature agrees that the EI test (Vinther 2002) does not require test-takers to simply repeat a string of sounds, but rather to decode the meaning of the target sentence and then reformulate it according to the speaker’s competence. This is particularly true if phonological memory (Baddeley 2003) is inhibited by a distractor. Accordingly, the EI test has been widely used as a measure of implicit grammatical competence (Erlam 2006). Others, however, contend the test only reflects learners’ phonological memory capacity.

This paper discusses data from the VILLA project, a multi-national initiative devoted to the earliest stages of the acquisition of Polish L2 (Dimroth et al. 2013). 17 Italian L1 and 17 French L1 learners with no experience of the target language took part in a 14-hour Polish course taught by a native speaker, whose speech constitutes the only input available: this was planned, recorded and later transcribed, so as to thoroughly correlate the development of the interlanguage with the input received. After 9 hours, learners took an EI test focussed on contrasts in case marking (NOM vs. ACC), as well as a digit span test as a measure of their working memory.

The paper aims to clarify whether learners performed the test by processing meaning, or rather by merely repeating sounds. Case-ending repetition accuracy is analysed alongside the phonemic distance between original and repeated utterances. The rationale is that even if case endings are correctly repeated, it is unrealistic to think that they convey any meaning if the words they are part of are so distant from the original to be hardly recognisable. One should then conclude that correct repetition is due to phonological rather than grammatical skills. To further verify this claim, accuracy scores are finally correlated with working memory capacity.

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