Task type and morphosyntactic competence in initial Polish L2

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This study aims to verify the effect of task type (Duff 1993) and of different communicative situations (Tarone & Parrish 1988) on initial learners’ morphosyntactic competence.

Within the Italian edition of the VILLA project (Dimroth et al. 2013), 31 Italian L1 learners with no experience of the target language took part in a 14-hour Polish course taught by a native speaker, whose speech was planned, recorded and transcribed in order to correlate the development of the interlanguage with the characteristics of the input.

The results of a comprehension test and a repetition test were correlated in order to verify whether learners can process syntactic functions (SUBJECT vs. OBJECT) based on case marking (NOMINATIVE vs. ACCUSATIVE). The role of inflectional morphology was probed by manipulating target sentence constituent order (SO vs. OS). Further, learners took part in a role-play aimed at eliciting transitive structures comparable to the targets of the tests.

By comparing learner output in semi-spontaneous interaction and in the tests, one can isolate the effect of task type and focus on the effect of the communicative situation on morphosyntactic competence. It appears that learners were able to differentiate syntactic functions using case marking in semi-spontaneous interaction only if they could also perform above chance on both SO and OS targets in the repetition and comprehension test. All other learners relied on a default SO word order and animacy contrasts; nonetheless, communication proved fully effective.

The findings suggest that structured tests make it possible to probe learners’ ”potential” competence, whereas interactional context elicits their ”actual” competence. This difference in performance is interpreted as a consequence of the different communicative pressure and cognitive load exerted by an abstract test situation, in which no real meaning is transmitted, and real interaction, in which communication is goal-oriented.

Keywords: morphosyntax, Polish, initial SLA, task type, communicative situation.