Incidental second language acquisition of grammatical gender in dialogue

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Nowadays, many people spend a part of their life in a second language (L2) environment. Although most of them improve in the foreign language, the majority does not reach native-like proficiency. This persistence of errors has been referred to as L2 'fossilization’. As fossilization occurs despite substantial exposure to correct L2 input, the question arises if and under which conditions natural input leads to L2 learning. The current study examined learners’ sensitivity to implicit corrective L2 feedback in a dialogue-like situation. Errors under study were grammatical gender errors in German learners of Dutch, which result from incorrect L1 transfer (Lemhöfer, Schriefers, & Hanique, 2010).

To test the effect of corrective feedback under rather natural, but experimentally controlled conditions, we created a simulated dialogue-game in which cards had to be described, i.e. with no explicit focus on learning. Participants were not interacting with a real conversation partner, but listened to recordings of a native speaker. We tested whether initial gender errors would be corrected after hearing the correct utterance from the recording. Results indicate that grammatical gender accuracy improved after receiving only one instance of correct L2 input per noun. However, the task was easy enough to lead to some participants’ suspicion that it was really about word gender. Therefore, we cannot be sure if learning conditions were incidental or intentional. In order to test this, results will be contrasted with another more implicit task to learn more about truly incidental second language learning.

This research does not only provide new insights into natural L2 acquisition, but also demonstrates the suitability of a new experimental paradigm to study these processes.


Keywords: grammatical gender, L2 acquisition, incidental learning.