Form-focused instruction and the acquisition of tense by Dutch-speaking learners of English: Experimental studies into the effects of input practice and output practice

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SUMMARY IN ENGLISH

The concept of practice as a prerequisite for learning a foreign language is a given for many language learners and language teachers. However, it has received relatively little attention from a theory-based perspective. In the past, much of the instructional practice related to tense in English consisted of mainly output-focused drills, which required learners to produce grammatically correct forms. Although this approach has found its way into contemporary language teaching and has proven useful in its own ways, it has focused almost exclusively on output practice to the exclusion of other forms of practice. Contemporary materials designed for explicit instruction on tense in English have seen changes such as the addition of input-based practice, which requires learners to interact with input without producing any forms.

This doctoral dissertation addresses the concept of practice by investigating the effects of input practice and output practice on the acquisition of tense by Dutch-speaking learners of English. It does so by providing—in Chapters 1, 2 and 3—relevant, theoretical background information about the L2 target features under investigation. In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, two approaches to second language acquisition (SLA), which assign different roles to practice, are compared in three computer-controlled learning experiments. Finally, all the chapters are brought together in a general discussion of the findings in Chapter 7.

In Chapter 1, Tense and linguistics, a linguistic introduction to the L2 target features under investigation is provided. The target features under investigation are the past and the present perfect when used to locate bygone situations in present-day English. Declerck (1991, 2003, 2006) defines bygone situations as situations which have taken place before the temporal zero point. The aim of this chapter is threefold: (1) to define and contextualize the grammatical category of tense, (2) to conceptualize tense using Declerck’s descriptive theory of tense in English and (3) to compare the uses of the past/present perfection distinctions in English and Dutch, with a special focus on the differences between these two typologically closely related languages.

When existing definitions of tense are compared with each other, it is clear that recurring items of both agreement and disagreement are visible. For example, linguists are in agreement that there is some form of relationship between tense and time. By contrast, there is no consensus on the morphological nature of tense, with some linguists claiming that tense is expressed only synthetically (i.e., by means of bound morphemes), and that analytic tense forms (i.e., forms such as the present perfect and the will-future, which are produced by combining free morphemes) cannot be accepted as tense forms because of their morphologically analytic nature. After the discussion of relevant items of agreement and disagreement, a conscious decision is taken to follow Declerck’s descriptive theory of tense in English, which accepts that certain analytic verb forms (e.g.,
present perfect) are tenses in their own right since they have temporal structures which are unique and cannot be found in any other verb forms.

Chapter 2, *Tense and complexity*, builds a bridge between the purely linguistic aspects of tense complexity and the challenges that ESL learners—including Dutch-speaking ESL learners—face when trying to acquire tense in English. At the heart of this chapter is the conceptualization of the term temporal *SLA verb-phrase complexity*, more precisely SLA complexity related to the past/present perfect distinction under investigation. A comprehensive definition of SLA verb-phrase complexity is provided at the start of the chapter. Subsequently, relevant features of the definition are explained in detail with references to linguistics and SLA throughout the chapter. The core idea on which the definition is based is that the complexity under investigation is a multifaceted concept which requires insights from a variety of subfields. Oppositions such as absolute versus relative linguistic complexity, global versus local linguistic complexity, complexity as a dependent or independent variable are intertwined in Chapter 2 with concrete tense-related examples related to the English verb phrase. The two themes that run through all the sections of the chapter are the definition of complexity provided at the start and DeKeyser’s (2005) discussion of what makes learning L2 grammar difficult. The detailed discussion of temporal SLA verb-phrase complexity, more precisely, the complexity involved in distinguishing between the past and the present perfect to locate bygone situations, takes into account, form-related, meaning-related and use-related complexity. In addition, mapping-related complexity is discussed since the acquisition of form-meaning-use mappings is the actual goal of SLA. The overall conclusion is that temporal SLA verb-phrase complexity is intricately interwoven with a variety of factors in both the L2 target features which are selected and in the SLA process itself. A distinction may be made between universal and specific items of complexity, with universal features (e.g., form-related, meaning-related, use-related complexity) being experienced by most—if not all—ESL learners and specific features, which are characteristic of specific constellations of factors related to the language learner and/or research design (e.g., L1 transfer, outcome measures). Although a distinction between these two types of items is made, forms of interplay arise, which can make it difficult to distinguish between the two.

In Chapter 3, *Tense and instructed SLA*, the focus is placed on the grammatical category of tense in the context of instructed SLA. The first section of Chapter 3 is dedicated to the study of temporality in SLA research, which came about incidentally but has developed into a well-structured, systematic and methodologically developed area of research with various lines of investigation. Two approaches have generally been used to investigate L2 temporality: (1) a form-oriented approach and (2) a meaning-oriented approach. The reader is introduced to both approaches, which are discussed in isolation and contrastively. In addition, the three studies that were carried out for the experimental
part of the doctoral dissertation are discussed in the context of the approaches to L2 temporality. In the second section of Chapter 3, the focus is placed on instructed SLA—more specifically on form-focused instruction (FFI)—and on two well-known approaches to SLA which both feature practice-based instructional setups as integral parts of the SLA process: (1) input processing and (2) skill acquisition theory. A description of the features of both approaches and a discussion of the roles of practice in both approaches provide the reader with the necessary background to be able to evaluate the experimental research carried out in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. The roles of practice in both approaches are different and one of the big differences is the presence or absence of practice-related skill specificity. Input processing does not regard the acquisition of language skills as skill-specific. This means that input practice will benefit the L2 learner when acquiring both receptive and productive skills. However, skill acquisition theory does regard the acquisition of language skills as skill-specific. This means that input practice will benefit the L2 learner when acquiring receptive skills and output practice when acquiring productive skills. This major difference is addressed in the research questions in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

Chapter 4, Study 1, is the first of three experimental chapters. Using treatment as a between-groups variable with three levels (input only, input practice, output practice), Study 1 was drawn up, in which 70 students of English participated. We assumed that explicit FFI would indeed have an effect on the participants’ performance on a tense-related test. Consequently, the focus of interest was not on whether FFI would or would not have an effect but on whether any differential effects could be found with respect to the three forms of instructional treatment provided. In addition, we were also interested in whether there was any interaction between the type of treatment and the types of effects (skill specificity). Using mainly quantitative data-collection methods, we decided on the following three within-groups variables: (1) time (pretest, posttest), (2) modality (receptive, productive) and (3) outcome measure (grammaticality judgement, selected response, constrained constructed response, translation). The three treatments were operationalized. Data analyses revealed a small increase from pretest to posttest performance (approximately 1.5 on a total score of 24) but this effect of time was not mediated by treatment, modality or outcome measure. In other words, all three treatment groups slightly improved their performance from pretest to posttest. However, it was impossible to state whether this increase resulted from any treatment since we decided not to include a no-treatment (control) group. As a result of these findings, four changes to the research design and methodology were formulated with a view to carrying out an improved second study. First, the number of treatments was reduced from three (input only, input practice, output practice) to two (input practice, output practice). Second, the input and output practice administered to the two treatments was geared towards the outcome measures used in the pretest and posttest. Third, the total number of test items was increased by
eight. This brought the total number of test items to 32. And fourth, only
tense-related questions were asked on the tests.

Chapter 5, Study 2, reports on the second experiment, which was carried out
one year after the first. The participants were new but the research questions
were essentially the same as the ones formulated in Study 1. Having imple-
mented the four changes formulated above, once again quantitative analyses
were carried out. This time the data from 71 participants were used. Data analy-
ses revealed a large increase from pretest to posttest performance (approx-
imately 4.5 on a total score of 32). Although a large increase was found, it was
still impossible for us to state whether this increase resulted from any treatment
since we decided not to include a no-treatment (control) group. Since the in-
crease in performance was large this time around, we decided to carry out a
third experiment.

Chapter 6, Study 3, is dedicated to the third and final study that was carried
out, which was carried out a year after Study 2. In essence, Study 3 was a repli-
cation of Study 2 but with the inclusion of both a no-treatment (control) group
to address the effect-of-treatment claim and a delayed posttest to address the
durability of possible effects. The data from 75 participants were analysed and
the research questions were the same as the ones formulated in Studies 1 and 2.
With the addition of a delayed posttest, we were able to add a fourth research
question to address the durability of any treatment effects. In effect, the num-
ber of treatments was kept the same as in Study 2, which had two treatments
(input practice, output practice). However, the no-treatment (control) group
was also given a form of treatment (not related to tense but to the grammatical
category of number). Since this treatment was not tense-related, the actual na-
ture of the treatment was not important for the research questions. For Study 3,
data analyses revealed once again a large increase from pretest to (immediate)
posttest performance (approximately 3.5 on a total score of 32). The analyses
showed significant increases in test performances (from pretest to immediate
posttest) for both the input-practice group and the output-practice group.
However, no significant increases were found for the no-treatment group. A
comparison of the data from the input-practice and output-practice groups
revealed no significant differences between both groups. In other words, no
differential effects between the two treatment groups were confirmed. Analyses
of the delayed posttest data revealed that the treatment effect appeared to be
durable although a small decrease was observed as far as delayed-posttest per-
formance was concerned.

In Chapter 7, General discussion, an overview of the findings from all three
studies is provided. As such, Chapter 7 brings the theoretical and experimental
chapters together by providing both a summary and a more detailed discussion
of the findings from the three studies that were carried out. The explicit FFI
provided to the participants did indeed bring about significant increases in the
participants’ posttest performances with regard to the complex temporal form-
meaning-use mappings under investigation. Although the increase was relatively small in Study 1, practice geared towards the outcome measures led to large increases in Studies 2 and 3. Moreover, the increases in test performance appeared to be of a durable nature when comparing pretest, immediate-posttest and delayed-posttest performances in Study 3. In the three studies, no overall differential effects were observed between participants who received input practice and participants who received output practice. In addition, no differential interactions were found between the type of practice (input practice, output practice) and modality (receptive, productive). One of the key features under investigation was the skill specificity of acquiring language skills. According to input processing predictions, the acquisition of L2 target features is not expected to be skill-specific. By contrast, according to skill acquisition theory, progression through the developmental stages is believed to be skill-specific. In other words, input practice leads to increases for receptive skills (outcome measures) whereas output practice leads to increases for productive outcome measures. Practice-based predictions made by both approaches were not confirmed in any of the three studies. One explanation for the findings may be found if a more nuanced conceptualization of skill specificity is used. Instead of focusing on the two ends of the skill-specificity continuum, we may need to look at possible positions between skill-specific and not skill-specific. Interaction with other factors (e.g., the open/closed nature of skills and tasks) may lead to a more finetuned picture of how language skills are learnt in specific contexts. Because of the lack of studies investigating the possible interaction between these features, no definite claims have been made. In addition to discussing the findings in detail, Chapter 7 also discusses the strengths and limitations of the experimental research. Strengths such as the design-related and methodological thoroughness and consistency, the novelty of the research focus as applied to L2 English and the computer-assisted language learning (CALL) environment in which the studies were carried out all contribute to the quality of research. However, limitations are also present in the form of a high degree of reductionism, the troublesome nature of complex target features as items of instruction, the nature of the instruction provided in the studies. Chapter 7 also provides a discussion of the implications of the results for language pedagogy. By way of conclusion, suggestions for further research are provided taking into consideration the strengths and limitations of the research described above. The overall conclusion is that practice may not make perfect but as long as it helps L2 learners on their way to form-related, meaning-related and use-related linguistic perfection, L2 researchers and L2 teachers should do all that they can to help provide insights into practice-based instruction to create instances of perfect practice and, in so doing, optimize the SLA process.