

The dynamics of foreign versus second language development in Finnish writing

Vieraan ja toisen kielen kehityksen dynamiikka
suomen kielen kirjoittamisessa

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My longitudinal study explored the development of beginner learners of Finnish as a foreign and Finnish as a second language from a dynamic perspective. The data used were gathered weekly for ten months from four learners in the Netherlands and four learners in Finland. In the Netherlands the learners learned the Finnish language by a teaching method that focused on grammar, while in Finland the learners learned the language by a teaching method that focused on meaning. The study looked for differences in overall group outcomes and explored individual development patterns and interactions between the measures.¹

The application of a dynamic perspective to explore the data means that what is studied is the patterns that emerge from language use. Language development is assumed to be a non-linear process and differences in the degree of variability are assumed to give insight into this process. In a dynamic approach, the constant fluctuations of language are considered to be information, and individual differences and developmental processes are important. Variability is seen as a sign of change and development in the language system; low variability in a subsystem indicates that the system is relatively organized and stable, high variability indicates that the system is changing and reorganizing until it settles again at the next developmental stage (Verspoor, Lo-

1. Kieliasun tarkistus Eleanor Underwood.

wie & Van Dijk 2008; Verspoor, De Bot & Lowie 2011). In this way, useful information about changes in subsystems can be detected (Van Geert & Van Dijk 2002). My longitudinal case study focused on intra- and inter-individual variability in, and interactions between syntactic and morphological complexity and accuracy measures in Finnish learner language.

The learners consisted of two groups, the FL and the L2 group. The FL group consisted of three Dutch students and one Belgian student majoring in Finnish in the Department of Finno-Ugrian Languages and Cultures at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. The L2 group consisted of four students (with German, Portuguese, Japanese and Indonesian as L1) who were learning Finnish through Finnish university courses in Finland. The data consisted of about 30 written texts per person. With the FL group they were part of the course, with the L2 group they were not.

Statistical analyses indicated that the FL and L2 groups were similar in many ways. Both groups showed more syntactic complexity (more complex sentence use) and morphological complexity (increase in average sentence and clause length in morphemes) during the period in question. Significant differences between the two groups were found in the use of cases and some related complexity and accuracy measures; the FL learners used a wider range of cases. Moreover, the FL group used morphologically more complex words during the period and were more accurate overall. Specifically, they applied the cases better and used more words correctly in terms of meaning and order in the context. The causes of the differences could be condition (type of instruction, language learning environment), the effect of L1, the limited amount of time of the study, or possible differences in motivation.

With these results in mind, the question arose as to whether individuals with a similar language background would differ too. To examine this, one focal learner was selected from each group. Both focal learners' L1 was a Germanic language (FL: Dutch, L2: German) and these two focal learners both wrote the most words in their respective groups. Moreover, the writings of these two learners both had the highest sample mean of their groups and they both were seriously interested in Finnish grammar and were keen to learn and understand the grammatical rules. Because German has a more detailed case system with more overt case markings than Dutch, the German learner may have been at a slight advantage in recognizing and using cases in Finnish.

Before comparing the two focal learners, their data were compared to their respective groups. This showed that the focal FL learner was similar to the group members in all measures that were tested statistically. Sometimes the development over time of isolated measures showed different patterns, which is to be expected from a dynamic perspective. The fact that the four FL learners were so similar could be attributed to the combination of similar context, instruction, L1, motivation and time. This showed that language development, at least in the foreign language learning context, might not be as chaotic or unpredictable as a dynamic approach might suggest. The focal L2 learner was similar to her group members in terms of general complexity measures, but clearly different in the measures related to cases, both in using them and in accuracy rates. The fact that the only clear differences between the focal L2 learner and

her group members were found in the area of cases suggests that this was an L1 effect. With German as an L1, the focal L2 learner was able to recognize and use them more easily.

The data of the two focal learners were then explored holistically and statistically. First the question of whether there were differences between the learners at the beginning and the end of the time span was explored. Two texts for each learner written at the beginning of the study served as a pre-test and two texts for each learner written at the end of the study served as a post-test. These eight texts were first scored holistically by seven native speakers of Finnish and experts on Finnish as an L2. They were scored on four criteria: sentence complexity, morphological complexity, general accuracy, and authenticity (idiomaticity). Except for the second text, where the focal FL learner was found to score higher on sentence complexity, no significant differences were found between the texts they had written; in other words, there were no differences between the two focal learners at the end of the academic year when scored holistically. Statistical analyses were then done on the last eight texts for each learner. They showed no differences in the complexity measures but did show a difference in the total number of errors (normalized to 100 words). In other words, the focal learners' writing was equally complex, but the learner with the focus on grammar was generally more accurate.

Finally, the development of the two focal learners' data was explored intensively. The learners' data demonstrated striking similarities in variability, increase and decrease in patterns, and in final outcomes, but some interesting differences in developmental patterns. One of the clearest differences between the two learners was that the FL learner's writing showed several peaks in several measures, of which the one in the use of cases other than the nominative, genitive and partitive was almost significant (and significantly so for another learner of the FL group), which suggests that these two FL learners had moments of overusing these cases. It is likely that the attention focused on these forms encouraged learners to use them, which may have resulted in a degree of overuse early on. Different patterns were also found in general trends and the interaction between case use and form errors. The general trend lines showed that the number of the FL learner's case form errors decreased quite suddenly, but her case use errors did not. For the L2 learner, both showed a sudden decline at the same time. This would suggest that there was a difference in the processing of these two items in the two learners. The learner with the focus on grammar could reason out form errors, which are rather schematic, so once the 'rule' had been discovered it could be applied over a range of cases, leading to the sudden drop. However, she could not reason out the use errors, which are more idiomatic and therefore item-based, so these form-meaning mappings were learned one by one. The learner with the focus on meaning had to learn both case forms and case uses more holistically, item by item through input and only after sufficient exposure were form and use connected and the items correctly used. On the whole it can be concluded that for the two focal learners the difference in focus on grammar and focus on meaning resulted in some differences in developmental trajectories but relatively little in final outcomes.

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