

Avoiding the Comparative Fallacy: A Review of Two Recent SLA Studies

Shirin Murphy

INTRODUCTION

One of the most common approaches to studying L2 acquisition involves the comparison of L2 performance and L1 norms with regard to a particular linguistic feature. However, as Bley-Vroman (1983) points out, such an approach can be misleading, since the L1 norms may not be as clear-cut as the researchers claim, and the L2 errors may actually represent a systematic application of the learner's developing target-language system. Rehner, Mougeon, & Nadasdi (2003) and Liu and Gleason (2002) represent two recent studies that examine L2 acquisition of particular target features. The following review will look at the ways in which the researchers take into account both L1 variability and the subtleties of the target features in order to gain a more accurate perspective on the L2 acquisition process.

THE STUDIES

Rehner, Mougeon, & Nadasdi (2003) examine the acquisition of the personal pronouns *nous* versus *on*¹ among advanced French as a Second Language (FSL) learners in Canadian immersion programs. Although both pronouns refer to two or more individuals, including the speaker, *on* is more informal and slightly marked whereas *nous* is considered a more formal variant. In their review of previous linguistic studies of these pronouns, the researchers point out that the choice of *nous* versus *on* is guided by further linguistic factors such as whether the referent is specific and restricted (a limited group of people known individually to the speaker), specific but not restricted (a cohesive group of people who are not necessarily all known to the speaker), or not specific and not restricted (a general grouping of people).

The study is motivated by three research questions: 1) whether FSL immersion learners use the same range of variants with the same discursive frequency as L1 speakers of French; 2) whether FSL immersion learners use the same range of variants with the same discursive frequency as French immersion teachers and authors of FSL pedagogical materials; and 3) whether the FSL immersion learners' use of variants is correlated with linguistic and extralinguistic variables that affect L1 spoken French, or whether there are variables that are specific to FSL learners. The authors' hypotheses are as follows: with regard to the first question, learners will overuse formal variants compared to L1 speakers; with regard to the second question, FSL teachers and preparers of pedagogical materials will also overuse formal variants and will underuse informal variants that are frequent in L1 spoken French; and with regard to the third question, learners will be influenced by the same variables affecting L1

¹ *Nous* is the first person plural pronoun, corresponding to *we* in English. *On* is a third person singular pronoun that can be roughly translated as *one* in English but is often used in spoken French as a less formal variant of *nous*.

speakers, but they will also be subject to learner-specific factors such as level of proficiency, amount of target language exposure, and L1 background.

The subjects of the study were 41 middle- and high-school students enrolled in a French immersion program and who did not speak French at home. The data was collected in the form of semi-directed, Labovian interviews based on the students' daily activities and was analyzed (through descriptive statistics and regression analysis) for the range and frequency of the variants, as well as for the influence of certain linguistic and extralinguistic variables, such as specificity/restriction and the effects of extracurricular target-language exposure, gender, socio-economic class, and L1 background, on the subjects' usage of variants.

The results indicate that, contrary to the researchers' hypotheses, the subjects do not use the formal variant *nous* more frequently than *on*, nor do the immersion teachers. In fact, they use *on* slightly more than *nous*, despite the fact that it is a more marked and less formal feature of spoken French. However, the pedagogical materials tend to favor *nous* over *on*, which might reflect a feature of written versus spoken French. Furthermore, even though their use of *on* outweighs their use of *nous*, the subjects do use *nous* much more frequently than do L1 speakers of French, who tend to prefer the less formal variant. With regard to extralinguistic factors, the findings confirm the hypothesis that greater extracurricular target language exposure causes learners to approach L1 norms by using *on* more frequently in their spoken French. Female and middle-class students tend to favor the more formal variant *nous*, which is also the case among L1 speakers of French. Learners whose L1 is typologically similar to French (Spanish and Italian) tend to overuse *nous*, possibly because their L1 has a pronoun similar to *nous* but no variant corresponding to *on*, whereas students with L1 English use *on* more frequently, possibly due to the use of *one* and the absence of a form that is morphophonetically similar to *nous* in English. Learners with other L1 backgrounds did not provide significant results. Regarding linguistic factors, referents that are nonspecific and unrestricted encourage the use of *on*, whereas referents that are specific and restricted favor the use of *nous*. These last findings reflect L1 patterns of variation, indicating that linguistic constraints are operable in both L1 and L2 use of these pronouns.

Liu and Gleason (2002) examine the acquisition of the article *the* by ESL learners with different L1 backgrounds. The study focuses specifically on the nongeneric uses of *the*, a methodological restriction that will help avoid difficulties stemming from the general complexity of the English article system. Basing their study loosely on Hawkins' (1978) Location Theory of article use, the researchers establish four subdivisions for the nongeneric use of *the*: cultural use (referring to a unique and well-known referent in a speech community), situation use (referring to a first-mention noun that can be sensed directly or indirectly by the interlocutors or is otherwise known by them), structural use (referring to a first-mention noun that has a modifier), and textual use (referring to a previously mentioned noun).

The authors pose the following research question: are the four types of *the* use equally difficult for ESL learners and are they acquired simultaneously? They hypothesize that the variability of the four categories leads to different levels of difficulty and that, therefore, they will be acquired separately.

The subjects of the study were 41 low-, 49 intermediate-, and 38 advanced-level ESL university students (or college-bound students in preparatory ESL classes). The proficiency level was determined by TOEFL scores and a cloze test administered by the researchers. The data were collected using an instrument of 91 sentences from which the article *the* had been

deleted, and the subjects were instructed to insert the article wherever necessary. Data analysis took the form of descriptive statistics, MANOVA for missed uses of *the*, and a pair-wise *t*-test to determine the correlation between each of the four categories.

The results indicate that the four categories of *the* use are not equally difficult for learners of L2 English, and that the easier categories are acquired first. The natural order of acquisition of the nongeneric use of *the* appears to be situation use initially, then the structural and textual uses, and, finally, cultural use. However, the results of the inter-group comparison show that while structural and textual use of *the* improves even when learners progress to the advanced level, situation and cultural uses level off and no longer improve significantly once the learners have advanced proficiency. The researchers qualify this result by stating that errors in situation use are much less frequent than those involving cultural use. Therefore, only the lack of improvement in the cultural use of *the* should be considered significant. The study also shows a difference between underuse and overuse of *the*: the underuse of *the* in obligatory contexts decreases significantly as proficiency increases, whereas the overuse increases between the low and intermediate levels, but then decreases as the learners progress to the advanced level.

DISCUSSION

The two studies described in the previous section are based on a comparison between L1 usage and L2 performance involving specific linguistic features of the target language. As Bley-Vroman (1983) states, certain measures must be taken by the researchers in order to avoid the *comparative fallacy* that arises from analyzing learners' language production in terms of native-speaker norms rather than in terms of their developing interlanguage system. The first step is on a general, conceptual level: the researchers must take into account linguistic variability for both L1 and L2 performance rather than insisting on systematicity. More specifically, if systematicity is indeed the goal, then it calls for a fine-grained analysis of the linguistic feature in order to avoid false claims that focus on one dimension of the feature but ignore another. The learner may well be systematic with regard to one aspect but may not have acquired further aspects of the target feature. This puts into question any general claims of learner performance with regard to obligatory context. A more accurate view of the acquisition process can be achieved by comparing the variability in the learners' performance with their own internally constructed linguistic systems rather than with target language norms.

Rehner, Mougeon, & Nadasdi (2003) go to great lengths to work with a fine-grained, subtle analysis of the target linguistic feature. They extensively review past studies of *nous* versus *on* usage, among both L1 and L2 speakers, and develop a framework that incorporates not only structural variability but also sociolinguistic variability within the L1 community. Although the researchers compare the learners' performance to L1 usage, they view L1 usage as variable with regard to factors such as gender, social class, and level of formality, and explore to what extent these factors also influence L2 performance. This helps avoid the pitfalls of an apparently straight-forward but ultimately misleading comparison of L2 errors versus L1 systematicity.

A further unique feature of Rehner, Mougeon, & Nadasdi's (2003) study is that the researchers examine how the target linguistic features are used by language teachers and in the pedagogical materials to which the learners are exposed. Cook (1999) emphasizes the importance of language teachers' use of the target language, stating that teachers should ideally

be L2 users who present learners with skilled L2 use that they can realistically obtain. However, the current study puts Cook's claim into question. The language teachers are all native speakers of French, yet they avoid certain forms of the target feature that are common in spoken Canadian French (such as the highly informal *nous-autres on* and *nous on*). Native speakers, in their role as teachers, use a pedagogical form of the language that approximates skilled L2 use by non-native teachers. The pedagogical materials to which learners are exposed have an equally strong effect, since the subjects' overuse of *nous* as compared to L1 speakers can be attributed to the frequency of its use in written French, particularly in language textbooks.

Liu and Gleason (2002) also work with an extremely subtle conception of the target feature *the*, which takes into account both structural and cultural criteria for its use. They cite previous studies which show that while learners may well be systematic with regard to one aspect of the linguistic feature, they will be variable in another and will acquire the different dimensions of the features at different rates. The variability in the learners' performance regarding a single target feature can be a useful indicator of how the learners conceptualize the feature and how they incorporate it in their developing interlanguage. However, the study does not reveal much about the learners' conceptualization of the English article system, only the differential rates of acquisition depending on different dimensions of the target feature and the level of proficiency of the learners. If the study had included a debriefing questionnaire or some qualitative analysis of individual performance, rather than just a quantitative view of 128 subjects, more could have been learned about how article use develops in interlanguage.

Liu and Gleason (2002) take into account variability among L1 speakers' use of the article *the*, which helps safeguard against seeing the target language system as categorical and by definition systematic. Furthermore, they point out that differential rates of acquisition of the different features of *the* are also a characteristic of L1 acquisition and that the L1 and L2 patterns are quite similar. A further interesting finding is the learners' stabilization with regard to the cultural use of *the*, providing evidence for Kellerman's (1995) Transfer to Nowhere principle which states that while cross-linguistic influence with regard to syntactic features decreases with proficiency, culturally-determined conceptual features are extremely difficult to modify and continue to be a source of L1 transfer even at high levels of proficiency. What is interesting in this study is that the target feature *the* has both a syntactic and a conceptual/cultural dimension, as revealed by the fine-grained analysis provided by the researchers, and the acquisition of these aspects of article use proceeds differently. A more primitive analysis of learner variability versus native-speaker systematicity, as described by Bley-Vroman (1983), would not have provided much insight into the process of L2 English article acquisition.

CONCLUSION

The studies by Rehner, Mougeon, & Nadasdi (2003) and Liu and Gleason (2002) represent recent scholarship regarding the L2 acquisition of specific linguistic features. Both studies take into account different aspects of the target features, ranging from syntactic constraints to cultural use, and also compare L2 performance to L1 variability rather than viewing L1 performance as systematic. They represent a more subtle approach than the type of research that Bley-Vroman (1983) warned against when he cautioned against the comparative fallacy. While it is still difficult to gauge learners' development with regard to specific

linguistic features and to draw general claims from such data, the researchers' attempt to incorporate variability, both with regard to the target feature and L1 performance, helps to shed light on the acquisition process that learners face.

REFERENCES

- Bley-Vroman, R. (1983). The comparative fallacy in interlanguage studies: The case of systematicity. *Language Learning*, 33, 1-17.
- Cook, V. (1999). Going beyond the native speaker in language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33, 185-205.
- Hawkins, J. (1978). *Definiteness and indefiniteness*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Kellerman, E. (1995). Crosslinguistic influence: Transfer to nowhere? *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 15, 125-150.
- Liu, D., & Gleason, J. (2002). Acquisition of the article *THE* by nonnative speakers of English: An analysis of four nongeneric uses. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 24, 1-26.
- Rehner, K., Mougeon, R., & Nadasdi, T. (2003). The learning of sociolinguistic variation by advanced FSL learners: The case of NOUS versus ON in immersion French. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 25, 127-156.

Shirin Murphy is a doctoral student in TESOL at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her current research interests are cross-linguistic influence, focusing in particular on third language acquisition, and the role of noticing and modality during input processing. Correspondence should be sent to Shirin Murphy, 83 Park Terrace West #4B, New York, NY 10034. E-mail: sam7@columbia.edu.