The Syntax and Pragmatics of Telicity in L2 English: Spanish vs. Slovak Learners

Previous research in the field of second language acquisition (L2A) has shown that linguistic features involving interfaces (e.g., syntax-pragmatics interface or syntax-semantics interface) are more difficult to acquire for second language learners (L2ers) than features involving only one linguistic component (e.g., syntax) (Pérez-Leroux, Cuza, Majzlanova & Sánchez-Naranjo 2008; Slabakova & Montrul 2008). In the field of L2A of the temporal-aspectual domain, previous studies emphasize the fact that more research is needed to clarify (i) the role of L1 in the interpretation of acquisitional difficulties of L2ers in syntactic and interface conditions (Pérez-Leroux et al. 2008), especially in online processing (Zheng et al. 2021), (ii) the effect of various task types on the performance of L2ers in their interpretation and production of syntactic and interface phenomena (Salaberry & Shirai 2002), and (iii) the relation between L2ers’ performance in offline tasks and their online processing of the same feature (Roberts & Liszka 2013; Renaud 2011; Zheng et al. 2021).

To address these research gaps, this poster presents the experimental design, stimuli, tasks, preliminary results, and examples of pedagogical applications of a PhD project aimed at studying telicity in the past temporal domain. Telicity interpretations depend both on interpretations of predicate telicity (combinations of verbs and object arguments), represented by processes in narrow syntax (MacDonald, 2008; Slabakova & Montrul 2008; Travis 2010) and on combinations of predicates with adverbial modifiers, which do not trigger feature-checking operations in narrow syntax, i.e., they represent the syntax-discourse interface (Slabakova & Montrul 2008). This allows to design two types of stimuli, involving syntactic and pragmatic cues of telicity encoding in the sentence structure. The theoretical background of the current study is based on formal theoretical analyses of this feature in Slavic languages, English and Spanish by MacDonald (2008) and Slabakova and Montrul (2008).

To address the research gap (i), the Interface Hypothesis (Tsimpli & Sorace 2006; Sorace & Serratrice 2009; Sorace 2011) will be tested with new data, with the aim to find out whether the differences in telicity interpretations are related to L1-L2 differences in telicity encoding in syntactic and interface conditions or whether syntactic cues are easier to acquire for speakers of both L1s than pragmatic cues. Research gap (ii) is addressed by studying telicity in a series of three tasks (an offline acceptability judgment task, an offline elicited production task and an online self-paced reading task). The participants are L2ers acquiring English in instructional settings with two typologically different L1s (Slovak/Czech and Spanish), divided into two proficiency groups (intermediate and advanced).

The applications of the study consist in designing a series of online pedagogical activities aimed at teaching the difference between telic and atelic events in syntactic and pragmatic contexts to L2ers of English since this phenomenon is not taught in instructional settings and this type of L2ers is often reported to have problems with pragmatic and discourse phenomena (Alruwaili 2014; Kaku 2009).
References