

Title: Middle-School Language Immersion Learners' Comprehension of Plural-Singular Marking:
Acquisition across a Typologically Distinct Language Pairing

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Evidence shows that language immersion classrooms are an effective method for establishing strong communicative ability in a second language (L2; Genesee, 2006), but that the L2 production skills ultimately attained differ from those of speakers who have learned the L2 as a first language (L1). In contrast to production, immersion learners are often found to score within L1-speaker ranges on comprehension tasks (Lindholm-Leary & Genesee, 2014), leading many to observe that there is an asymmetry between the receptive and productive proficiency these L2 learners attain. However, immersion research typically evaluates comprehension and production at differing levels of scrutiny, with tasks measuring holistic comprehension contrasted with production tasks targeting a particular morphosyntactic feature.

To date, only one study examines immersion learners' comprehension of a morphosyntactic feature at a level comparable to a targeted production task. Lew-Williams (2017) conducted visual-world eye-tracking experiments in Spanish two-way immersion showing that, unlike their Spanish-L1 classmates, English-L1 participants were not able to use abstract grammatical gender-marked articles to predict upcoming referent nouns in Spanish. However, they could use the articles to predict in contexts when article gender coincided with biological gender or when article number marked a plural-singular (PS) difference. Lew-Williams concluded that the semantic transparency of features like biological gender or number may help make up for the more limited L2 exposure (as compared to L1 contexts) that an immersion classroom provides.

The present study reports on an experiment that addresses the question of how immersion learners comprehend a feature that is more semantically transparent than grammatical gender, PS number marking, but is also not a feature shared between the L1 and L2. Participants were middle-school students in English immersion classrooms in Taiwan, who began L2 exposure in early childhood (mean age = 4;6), and had 8 ½ years of exposure to English on average. Performance of this L2 group was compared to age-matched English-monolingual Canadians. An experiment that combined a visual-world eye-tracking task with a picture decision task examined Mandarin L1 participants' comprehension of English PS marking. The picture decisions reveal participants' final interpretation, and thus reflect *static* comprehension while the eye-tracking reflects *dynamic* comprehension over time (Trueswell & Gleitman, 2004). Picture decision results indicate the L2 group was less able to use PS morphology to arrive at a correct stimulus interpretation. Eye-tracking results showed that the L2 group was less sensitive to singular marking, but were not different from the monolingual controls for plural marking. Like Lew-Williams (2017), the present study reveals differences in comprehension of morphosyntax for L2 immersion. The present study is unique in that it shows that semantic transparency is not enough to ensure full acquisition of a typologically contrastive L2 feature in language immersion, and that differences can exist in both dynamic comprehension and in the final static interpretation.

References:

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