

Eine zweite Sprache lernen: Empirische Untersuchungen zum Zweitsprachenerwerb

Edited by Heide Wegener

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Reviewed by Ursula Wingate

This book is a selection of twelve papers from the Colloquium 'DaZ-Erwerb' (Acquisition of German as a Second Language) of 1995. The majority of articles deal with the naturalistic acquisition of morphological and syntactic structures by immigrants in Germany, following the tradition of the ZISA project by investigating developmental sequences from a learner-oriented perspective.

Ocke-Schwen Bohn's paper discusses existing research into the perception of sounds in the target language. It focuses on learner variables and L2 variables. Bohn argues that problems are caused by learners' perception of the phonetic relationship between L1 and L2 sounds. These perceptions change with increasing progress in the foreign language and the problems diminish.

Natascha Müller compares how an Italian L2 learner, a bilingual and a monolingual child positioned verbs in German subordinate clauses and in relation to the direct object, and found that similar mistakes occur despite the different acquisition modes.

Stefanie Haberzettl investigates the positioning of sentence components in the interlanguage of three L2 children. She concludes that not only L2, but also L1 children tend to place the 'agent' into initial position and not to make use of the flexible German sentence structure to mark salient information.

Another comparison of L1 and L2 children is carried out by Heide Wegener. She finds their acquisition of the passive voice shows similarities in terms of first appearance, progress, and problems encountered.

The contribution by Rainer Dietrich and Patrick Grommes is concerned with the developmental sequences of negation in naturalistic L2 acquisition and demonstrates that the development from one-word to intrasentential negotiations is determined by the development of other syntactic structures.

There are two papers, one by Angelika Becker and the other by Christine Dimroth and Norbert Dittmar examining the acquisition of the particles 'auch' and 'nur' and their correct positions.

Zvi Penner reports first results of a pilot study in which the relationship between grammar deficits and comprehension difficulties by immigrant primary school children in German speaking Switzerland is investigated.

She finds that deficits in the acquisition of nominal phrases affect the understanding of mathematical problems.

A topic that has attracted little attention in SLA research is the re-acquisition of languages. Henning Wode observed how three children who had learned English in the age of four to eight and subsequently forgot it, relearned the language. He concludes that the theories for other language acquisition types do not suffice in explaining the phenomena occurring in the re-acquisition of languages.

Another two contributions deal with languages other than German. The paper by Maria Chini describes the acquisition of the Italian gender system by three German native speakers. Peter Jordens reports on experimental research into the assessment and production of the past tense of Dutch pseudo-verbs by L1 adults and children, and by adults for whom Dutch is the L2.

More relevant for the learning and teaching of German as a Foreign Language in England could be the article by Erika Kaltenbacher which investigates the phonological difficulties experienced by, among others, English native speakers. Kaltenbacher focuses on rhythmical patterns and the reduction of vowels in unstressed position in German and how different native languages prevent learners from achieving correct stress patterns and vowel reductions.

Languages such as English, German, Russian and Swedish distinguish between stressed and unstressed syllables. Of these languages, German has a distinct metric pattern, i.e. a regular temporal order of stressed syllables on the word, phrase and sentence level. In long German words, an extra accent (Nebenakzent) appears to provide for the alternating pattern. By contrast, English does not have this regular alternation and as a consequence, more vowels are unstressed and therefore reduced. Another difference between English and German lies in the way word stress is phonetically realised, namely in the sequence of high-pitched sounds.

In the data from American students of German, Kaltenbacher finds evidence that phonetic transfer from the L1 influences their performance: they reduced 35% percent of unstressed vowels in positions where no reduction occurs in German. From this finding, teachers of German to English native speakers may derive the advice that the alternating stress pattern and its impact on vowel reduction has to be attended to.

The articles in this book certainly make interesting reading for researchers into second language acquisition, but offer no concrete guidance for practitioners in foreign language teaching and learning.