A Report on my Foreign Language Learning Experience
BA English Language and Communication

Focus

I aim to discuss and evaluate my acquisition of the grammatical systems of foreign languages; focusing primarily on Finnish, though with reference to German. Having done a short three week course for total beginners in Finnish and having studied German to undergraduate level, I have achieved a very different level of competence in the languages. These two entirely separate learning experiences give me a basis for comparison and contrast that I aim to explore fully. I am also interested how my previous knowledge of German might have affected my acquisition of Finnish. This report will principally be an exercise in introspection, however through my background reading and triangulation I aim to make it as valid as it is possible for an individual case to be.

I was particularly interested in my acquisition of grammar for a variety of reasons, of which probably the foremost was that it is something I feel I have always struggled with in foreign language learning. In part I have struggled with it as I have always found its finer points somewhat unnecessary for communicative purposes, therefore my difficulty has been motivation. This disregard for grammatical precision has been seemingly proved right to me in my experiences in Germany, as my grammatical naivety in certain areas never affected my ability to be understood. Though I must point out that my basic grammar is ‘correct’ and that it is only certain inflectional morphemes etc. that I do not concern myself with.

However I also feel that it is the grammar of a language that enables a learner to progress further from merely naming items and using set phrases in their speech. It is this progression from knowing the lexis of a language to being able to communicate in it that I find interesting, as it has always been my primary aim when learning languages. So, paradoxically I both respect the need for grammar in language; yet question how important it should be. My argument is not with grammar in itself, more with the prescriptive tradition that I have encountered in my language learning. In my personal view grammar is the most fundamental aspect of a language, though it is unnecessarily focused on at times; so being at the core of language I felt it was a far more interesting aspect than lexis or pronunciation.

Another underlying motive for my interest in grammar is also connected to my experience of German; though I had tried (however half-heartedly) for years to learn the grammatical rules and principles of the language, it was not until I lived in Germany that I gradually started to use them correctly in unplanned speech acts. I wanted to investigate for what reason this might be and whether this was symptomatic of the way that grammar is learned universally.

My final reason for focusing on grammar was that Finnish grammar is unusual compared with most European languages in that it is agglutinative. When I realised that Finnish had a grammatical system most unlike any ever encountered before I predicted that learning it would be the biggest challenge I would face when it came to learning the language. I was also intrigued by the idea of an agglutinative grammar, which added to my conviction that it would be the most interesting aspect to focus on, potentially giving a much wider scope for discussion.
Discussion of relevant reading

There have been many changes in the theories of how languages, and through that, grammar have been learnt during the twentieth century. Until the late 1960’s it was thought that second language (L2) learners’ speech was merely an incorrect version of their target language, with mistakes attributed to transfer from their first language (L1) (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). This was the basis of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) (Brown, 2000, Lightbown and Spada, 1999) which believed that L2 learning would be successful if the learner could overcome the differences between the linguistic systems in their target language and their L1 (Brown, 2000). So for effective learning, the learners’ aim would be to identify what was similar and also different between the two languages and then focus their studies on these. Within this, various linguists (Stockwell et al. Prato) identified hierarchies of difficulty based on the assumption that the features of language which were most distinct between the L1 and L2 would be the hardest for the learner to acquire (Brown, 2000). Which from my experience of learning German is true in some instances yet not in others; I acquired the different word order with relative ease, whereas the use of four cases instead of two in English I found exceptionally difficult.

Another presumption of CAH was that mistakes would be ‘bi-directional’; French learners of English and English learners of French’s errors would be in the use of parallel linguistic features (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). For example there is a difference in the word order in relation to direct objects between French and English. In English the direct object always comes after the verb; in French it comes after the verb if it is a noun, but before if it is a pronoun. According to CAH French and English learners would both confuse this word order and use the word order of their Li, where in fact research has shown that English learners of French are far more likely to make the mistake than the French learners of English (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). It is this prediction of errors that CAH was based around, yet there is a difficulty in this as it does not reflect individual learners and as in the research stated above, is not always correct. It is without doubt that CAH is not a complete enough theory to explain the complex problems of learning a foreign language.

An extension, or what Wardhaugh called a ‘weak’ version of CAH is cross-linguistic influence (CLI) (Brown, 2000) which is a more observational form of contrastive analysis. CLI switches the emphasis from predictions of errors based on the L1 to the influence that the L1 can and normally does have. It is based on the assumption that all prior experience will play a role in any learning event and that the native language, as prior experience, cannot be overlooked (Brown, 2000). This makes CLI a much more appealing approach as it does not confine how one looks at the progression of the learner to examining transfer, yet accepts that the L1 will have an affect on the learning process. In the case of lexis for example there is no doubt that words that are similar in form and meaning in the L1 and the L2 are much easier to learn as they have a clear relationship and are more easily remembered.

A number of studies have shown that errors may be better explained as the learner’s attempts at unravelling the structures of the target language, rather than transference (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Leading on from this, a different way of looking at how a learner acquires their target language is to look at their errors with the aim of discovering what the learner actually knows about the language. This is ‘error analysis’ and involves the detailed description and
analysis of language learners’ errors, in an attempt to understand how languages are learned (Brown, 2000, Lightbown and Spada, 1999). As Pit Corder wrote in 1967 (Lightbown and Spada, 1999) if learners are producing ‘correct’ utterances it is possible that they are repeating things they have heard, whereas by using forms that differ from the target language they are indicating their current understanding of the rules and patterns of that language (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). This reflects ways in which languages have been taught in the past, where phrases and grammatical rules were learned by rote, as my parents did with French in their schooling, leaving them both unable to start or maintain a conversation in French, though they can recite verb forms. From my own experience there are many phrases in German that I know as a set phrase, which I did not at first understand grammatically but as my knowledge of the language has progressed I have used them to check rules. Through looking at a learner’s errors it can be possible to ascertain the knowledge of the grammar that they possess; for example, they may have the generalized rule for the past tense, but have not yet mastered the irregular forms and over-generalise. Though they are making errors, it is evident that they have knowledge of the rule.

The idea of universal grammar (UG) in relation to children’s L1 acquisition, in that many of the rules they acquire appear to be universal, is also related by many to the acquisition of an L2. Through UG there are concepts that are features of all languages, giving humans the ability to first learn their L1 and then subsequently foreign languages. Within this the grammatical rules that are shared by all languages are governed by parameters (Flynn, 1987 in Brown, 2000). Different languages set the parameters differently, which then creates the individual grammars of languages. The parts of the target language that have to be learnt are the settings of the parameters on which languages vary; so it is a case of learning to set the parameters and not learning completely new structures (Cook, 2001). This has similarities to the CAH in that it tries to explain the reasons for difficulties, yet it is distinct from it as it deals with the complexities of innate knowledge rather than merely transferring differences between languages.

The ways in which grammar is naturally learned can be divided into four different processes: noticing; reasoning and hypothesizing; structuring and restructuring; and automatizing (Hedge, 2000). A learner first has to notice specific features of language and then begins to work on the relationship between meaning and form, next trying to make sense of the rule. Through reasoning and hypothesizing the learner identifies patterns and can hypothesize rules from these patterns by using strategies for analysing and reasoning. When a learner identifies a new grammar concept they structure it, integrating it into the grammar in their mind; this is then restructured when the learner moves onto another stage in development and new knowledge is added. When a grammatical rule is automatized it is used naturally, without conscious thought and this process will only occur with individual rules, as and when the learner is ready (Hedge, 2000). Within this there is a difference between implicit and explicit knowledge; implicit being intuitive and acquired naturally and explicit that is received from teachers and textbooks. Most learners will normally have access to both. A learner’s implicit knowledge is what they use to try and produce language, yet their explicit knowledge can help; Seliger (1979) predicted that knowing the rule helps with the structuring process when it comes to internalize a grammatical rule (Hedge, 2000).

The concept of a learner having various interlanguages at different stages of their
development was coined by Selinker (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). These interlanguages are interim grammars that a learner develops throughout their learning process: a learner of English would start with just words; then progress to acquiring SVO word order and so forth (Cook, 2001). This interlanguage is the learner’s unconscious knowledge of the target language and is implicit. This knowledge can be added to through instruction, though according to Pienemann’s teachability hypothesis a student’s interlanguage has to be close to the point when a L2 structure would be acquired naturally if it is to be learnt through instruction (Cook, 2001).

Study of how English grammar is learned by L2 learners has found that grammar is acquired in much the same way as for native children. For example grammatical morphemes are acquired in a sequence by L1 and L2 speakers (Cook, 2001, Lightbown and Spada, 1999); the order of sequence is not the same, however it is found to be the same with learners with different L1s (Cook, 2001). Another example is negation; it has been found that learners of English as a foreign language go through four stages in learning how to negate, which are almost identical to native speakers’. This ties in with the concept of UG and suggests that all the grammar of a specific L2 will be learnt in the same manner by all learners.

The language learning experience

I was both apprehensive about the thought of learning Finnish and suspicious of what I might gain from the experience, and therefore my motivation, before I began the three week course. Having discovered that Finnish was an agglutinative language I was also concerned about how well I would be able to master it and how complex it would be.

The course was run in an informal setting and in each lesson we were given worksheets introducing various new concepts and vocabulary. The course was obviously designed to teach us about all aspects of the language simultaneously, which with regards to grammar did not really fit in with the teachability hypothesis (Cook, 2001). Throughout the course, I felt much more comfortable learning the lexis and the pronunciation than I did the grammar. In part I think this was due to my ability to ‘notice’ specific features of language (Hedge, 2000), as my interlanguage was really only at the first stage of naming objects (Cook, 2001, Lightbown and Spada, 1999). I found it particularly hard to ‘notice’ any specific grammatical features of the language when Sarah (the teacher, not her real name) was speaking, though I believe this is due to the greater ability to reason and hypothesize when language is written down and therefore intransient. One comment I made in my diary after the third lesson was: "I can do it fine when it’s written down too, but when she’s [Sarah] saying something I can’t see I can’t understand a word". Learning the lexis through speech was passable but with sentences I needed to see them written to a) understand what they meant and b) to comprehend how the grammar might be working.

During the first lesson we were taught the alphabet and some set phrases. The pronunciation of Finnish is similar in many ways to that of German, so I was at a definite advantage to most of my class mates in this manner which gave me a confidence boost. We were given the set phrases in Finnish on a sheet and then Sarah told us what they were in English. The construction of the phrases was slightly different to English; for example ‘kuka han on?’ translates directly as ‘who she is?’. We were also given the ways in which to reply, so to the question above you would reply ‘Han on...’ (She is...). When we were writing the
translations I noticed that I was unusual compared to my neighbours as I used the English word order, where they translated directly; writing the corresponding word above the Finnish. After the lesson I commented in my diary: "What’s the point in writing the English sentences in the wrong order? Isn’t it obvious what they correspond to?". After thinking about this I realised there were possibilities linked to my previous study of German for why I was working in a different way; potentially I could be transferring my knowledge of that word order system to Finnish. Though in this instance the German word order would be the same as English (as it is still essentially an SVO system), through German I am aware of verbs at the end of sentences. Also perhaps I had better strategies for reasoning and hypothesizing (Hedge, 2000) due to my practice at learning languages, whereas my neighbours were comparatively inexperienced.

In the second lesson we were told that verbs have four modes and practised conjugating verbs in the indicative mode. The practising of conjugation was relatively easy for me as I used my experience of language learning to realise that it would follow a pattern and I noticed that I had a lot more confidence to make guesses than most. Verb conjugation must be part of universal grammar, and I have experience of adjusting to another verb conjugation system with German, and so I was already aware of the parameters (Brown, 2000, Cook, 2001), I just needed to know how to adjust them. This also relates to Hawkins’ theory that if the learner has increased language awareness of their L1 it might lead to more success in the L2 (Cook, 2001). Though I was using my L2; through learning German to a high standard I am more aware of grammar in general.

We then moved on to buying train tickets, where we were given a written dialogue. In this dialogue Sarah began to identify what meanings the suffixes of verbs had, for example ‘-ko’ indicates a question, roughly translated as ‘so you?’. I was able to structure these rules in my brain fairly easily, and with ‘-ko’ especially was then able to identify their meanings when they were used in subsequent lessons. It was clear to me that I had retained the endings structure quite well as I began to be able to ‘notice’ the different endings when Sarah was speaking, though not understanding the complete utterances, as my knowledge of lexis was not strong enough.

The next grammatical point we learnt was the cases of nouns, of which there are about fifteen. Finnish does not have any prepositions, so the cases are used in place of them. The cases are formed by a suffix on the end of the noun, this rule I was also able to structure in my mind; in the sense that I was aware that the ending of a noun gave its relation to the other objects in the sentence. So it was as if I was very slowly adding to my interlanguage of Finnish; for both nouns and verbs I knew that the suffixes were vital to the exact meaning of the word or sentence. However I was unable to learn what the individual suffixes meant, I needed to use a reference table that we had been given, plus I still had to check the meanings of nearly all words. It was at this point, after about lesson five, that I began to feel incredibly frustrated with the whole experience: "I’m never going to retain anything we are learning, especially as it is so complicated". I definitely found the basic grammar concepts easy to grasp and structure internally, but to actually use them communicatively was beyond me. It was as though I was receiving a vast quantity of explicit knowledge too quickly, which was going against the teachability hypothesis, yet a trickle of the information was being internalized.

We followed on from learning the cases by being told about consonant gradation.
This involves the omission or alteration of consonants when suffixes are applied for case. It is a complicated yet seemingly regular process which was explained to us in brief and we were given a sheet with a detailed explanation. This was far and above my interlanguage at this stage and though I could grasp the idea that consonants may change, I was overwhelmed and continued to make errors when I was using the language. In reality when I adjusted consonants correctly it was through luck and had no bearing on my knowledge. I was aware that there were rules, but I could not structure them or even notice when I made errors. This is something that happened in my German production; I could often realise that I had made an error, but would not know how to phrase something correctly. As though I had internalized the rule and learnt the parameters, but not the forms in the language that I needed, but this was not happening in Finnish. I experienced this in part with the `'-ko' question ending, but almost in the reverse: I began to use it indiscriminately; whenever I wished to ask a question I made sure that I had used `'-ko' somewhere in the sentence. In this instance it was as though I had learnt the form, yet was not aware of the full intricacies of the rule.

In the final lesson we were told about the verb tenses in Finnish and given a sheet with how they are conjugated. Again with this exercise, I was able to grasp the concept and basic rules; I could tell you that the perfect tense was formed of the present form of `to be' ("olen") and the equivalent of the past participle¹. However I achieved no ability to actually use the different tenses without direct reference to the information sheet.

Sarah was very encouraging about my Finnish and at times she commented that my grasp of certain concepts was impressive. Others in the class also expressed that I was particularly good at certain tasks. So even though I was not able to grasp all the concepts that we were introduced to, there were certain areas where I was perceived to be better than the norm. There were other students though who clearly were highly motivated and this was evident, as it was obvious they had done practice etc. between lessons. Their motivation clearly paid off in some areas as they were much more proficient in them than me.

Conclusion

23 Through the experience of learning a language in three weeks I have come to the definite conclusion that there are certain aspects that can be learnt in such a short space of time. Learning a language is a challenge that involves different processes with the end and final result being automization (Hedge, 2000). Though this is normally achieved under natural circumstances there is no doubt that explicit instruction can help in reaching the end target. During my leaning experience of Finnish the only input I received was explicit and directed, and the time constraints prevented me from getting a competent knowledge of the language. With German, it was when I encountered the language naturally on a daily basis that I really internalised my knowledge of the language and automatized many of the grammatical features. In such a short space of time as three weeks it is impossible to gain much knowledge of a language; for automization a much longer time, plus more natural exposure is required

In relation to how grammar is learnt this experience has given me some insight into how I, and perhaps others, do conform to some of the theories on how it is learned. It is without doubt that some of the grammar rules that we were taught were out of my range of understanding at that time, my interlanguage was not

1 We were not told given the name ‘past participle’, but it appears to be the same.
ready to process that information. These grammar rules were not ‘teachable’ to me; my interlanguage would not be at a level to process them, until my language had advanced dramatically. However I did process some, or parts of some, of the rules, mainly through reasoning and hypothesizing (Hedge, 2000) which shows that instruction does have a place in the learning process.

With regards to the level of Finnish I achieved, it is fair to say that I have not retained much of what I was taught, though there are certain expressions and rules that I do. In the sense of communicative competence² I do not have any, but I do have a small amount of linguistic competence. In my experience of German progression in my communicative competence² always followed on after I had made progress in my linguistic competence and I was not able to communicate effectively until I had spent a considerable time in the learning process.

I do believe that previous language learning experience greatly helped me, and with a greater motivation I would have perhaps learned more. What this experience has proved to me is that there are both generalized and personal factors which affect the language learning process. Though we can hypothesize as to how easily learners will acquire their target L2, there will always be personal factors that are involved.

Bibliography


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² Chomsky