

THE ROLES OF NON-NATIVE PARENTS AND FIRST LANGUAGE (L1) IN THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (L2)

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Abstract

This paper provides different perspectives and evidence on how interactions to non-native parents would influence the language development of child L2 learners of English. The discussion itself is an extension of recent debates of a relevant issue with supports from research data obtained in a project that longitudinally explores the naturalistic acquisition of the second language by Indonesian child L2 learners of English in England. Two different types of main data are involved in the study; a comprehensive language exposure study through Utrecht Bilingual Language Exposure Calculator (UBiLEC) and a twelve-month longitudinal data collection of everyday language production. Data from UBiLEC and the entire language corpus from research participants are analyzed to reveal important information about whether parental input and L1 play any role in shaping the language development of the children. Findings from the study indicate that exposures to parent's non-native language do not necessarily accelerate or delay a child's language growth. Further, the study reflects that similar L2 errors produced by parents at home can be traced in the language production of the research participants. It was also revealed that L1 plays an important role in the production of L2 errors.

Keywords: L2 Acquisition, Non-Native Input, Child L2 Learners

INTRODUCTION

The language skills of children who speak more than one language present fascinating facts for linguists to investigate. A wide range of studies has been conducted in the past decades to explore how a child acquires a new language (L2) simultaneously along with developing the existing first language (L1). Such a work face interesting challenges especially when the acquired language and the one being acquired come from distant language family or backgrounds.

A wide range of previous studies has investigated the roles of L1 in the process of L2 acquisition. Many of these studies have mainly investigated European languages or those of close relationship to them. Unfortunately, there have been a relatively small number of studies on the acquisition of English by Indonesian L2 learners in naturalistic settings. For this reason, the author's original intention was to conduct relevant research with the purpose of investigating the roles of learners' native language and exposure to parents' L2 in L2 development. This publication is expected to become one of the main references for future works investigating similar topics and for any readers who might be interested in the relevant issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the past decades, there have been a vast number of debates on whether the first language is necessarily an important predictor in the acquisition of L2. Linguists tend to have different opinions about how much L1 and L2 would influence each other. Jarvis (2000), for instance, asserts that L1 influence can be traced as L2 continues to develop. For this reason, he believes that L1 influence may be reduced as L2 proficiency develops further or increase if L2 growth does not reflect significant development.

Similarly, Sundquist (2005) also agrees that L1 plays some roles in the acquisition of L2. He refers to variability to relate to learner's problems in mapping between abstract and surface verbal inflections. His opinion is an extension of Haznedar and Schwartz's (1997) and Prevost and White's (1999) proposal suggesting that learners are considered to have unconscious knowledge of the functional projections and features underlying tense and agreement. In other words, this proposal suggests missing inflections in L2 production, which to some extent relate to most, if not all, possible differences between L1 and L2.

According to Foley and Flynn (2013), first language (L1) influence on the acquisition of L2 can be manifested in the way it affects fluency of use, path, and rate of development, and conditions under which the L1 transfers to the L2. With regards to how L1 influence affects the frequency of use of specific forms in the L2, a number of earlier studies have provided evidence that the absence of particular forms in L1 tends to predict a possibility that the learners will avoid using such a form in their L2 production (Kellerman, 1979). Path and rate of L2 development, furthermore, also seems to be influenced by how similar forms of grammar are exhibited in L1 and L2. Studies confirmed that learners of L1 Chinese, for instance, produce determiner *this* much earlier than article *the*, while a child whose L1 was Spanish could productively produce the two items at the same time (Zobl, 1982). Finally, L1 knowledge has also been recorded to influence L2 production under certain condition.

Recently, Hoff et al. (2014) published a meta-analysis of different studies of the relation of language input to language development in Spanish-English bilingual children in the US. They found out that there are three possible sources of influence in language acquisition; parents' own background, older brother or sister, and interactions in society. They assert that if parents or siblings are more dominant in one language, the bilingual child will receive more influence from that language. In contrast, if the home language is less dominant and the child is exposed more dominantly to L2 (i.e., English), more interactions may be happening in L2, and therefore the child is more exposed to L2.

METHOD

The present study discusses a portion of data collected from a much larger work initially aiming to explore the acquisition of English morpho-syntax by child L2 learners of English. The data for the current work has been exclusively extracted with the purpose of investigating the roles of L1 in the process of L2 acquisition.

Two research participants were selected for the study; Mawar, 2;4 years, and Melati, 9;3 years, at the commencement of the study. As it investigated language acquisition by

two independent research subjects, this research was set to be completed longitudinally as a case study over the course of twelve months. For this particular purpose, different sets of data revealing patterns of both language production and exposure from the two children are required.

The first form of data was collected through Unsworth's (2012) UBiLEC (Utrecht Bilingual Language Exposure Calculator) digital questionnaire with a special intention to gather information about each child's exposure to the target language (English). The data were collected, through a series of interviews with the respected parents of each child, at three different points of time during the data collection period. Three different types of information have been collected through UBiLEC; the amount of exposure to L2, length of exposure to L2, and quality of exposure to L2. This information will be able to confirm whether a different level of exposure to L1 and L2, both simultaneously and successively, provides any impact on L2 development.

The other set of data were collected through lengthy recording sessions over the course of one year. For this purpose, the investigator followed the two children and recorded their verbal interactions once to two times in a month for a duration between 30 - 120 minutes each. These meetings include family interactions, conversations with English speaking interlocutors, or any other informal and social interactions involving the child. All the recorded audio data were then transcribed and secured in CLAN (Computerized Language Analysis) format to be digitally analyzed later (MacWhinney, 2014).

All data were collected in England, and all language production by the research subjects are spontaneous and in a naturalistic setting. Recorded data from the two research participants previously mentioned have been extracted accordingly and analyzed for further relevant discussion. A complete overview of this will be presented in the subsequent section of the paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Exposure to L2 and Performance

As mentioned earlier, the lengthy data collection period has resulted in a huge amount of data, most of which have been extremely beneficial in explaining the two research subjects' L2 acquisition trajectory. Table 1 and 2 below provide information about the child's language exposure during the 12 months of study, at three different points of time (P1, P2, P3). AoE, LoE, and QoE stand for Amount of Exposure, Length of Exposure, and Quality of Exposure, respectively.

Table 1. Mawar's Exposure to L2

	P1	P2	P3
AoE	50	50	64
LoE (cum)	0.7	1	1.1
LoE (trad)	1.3	1.7	2.3
QoE	3.8	3.8	3.6

Table 2. Melati's Exposure to L2

	P1	P2	P3
AoE	35	35	35
LoE (cum)	0.6	0.9	1
LoE (trad)	1.3	1.8	2.3
QoE	3	3	3

As seen in the two tables above, the amount of exposure to L2 received by Mawar increases over time, while that of Melati seems to remain at the same level. The two had been exposed to L2 English for approximately the same amount of time (both cumulatively and traditionally) although Melati is significantly older than Mawar. From this data, we know that most of their exposure to L2 occurred during their residence in England. This is reflected in their Quality of Exposure (QoE) that is rated at level 3 (out of 5) or higher by their parents. Mawar's QoE score is higher since her parents are both of linguistics major and are much more proficient in English than Melati's parents. It is worth mentioning that both children were exposed to authentic English (at school or nursery) and non-native English (at home and other interactions with non-native English speakers).

In order for us to conclude whether interactions with non-native L2 speaking individuals would have any impact on L2 development, we will need to look at child's L2 development patterns and their L2 exposure features. For this purpose, we will compare data from table 1 and 2 above with child's MLU (Mean Length of Utterance) as in the following figures. MLU, although not without any criticism, is considered as a relatively reliable measure of linguistic productivity in children. The calculation is obtained by dividing the number of morphemes by the number of utterances (usually among at least 100 utterances collected from a single transcript of data). Let us refer to the following figure for Mawar's MLU data.

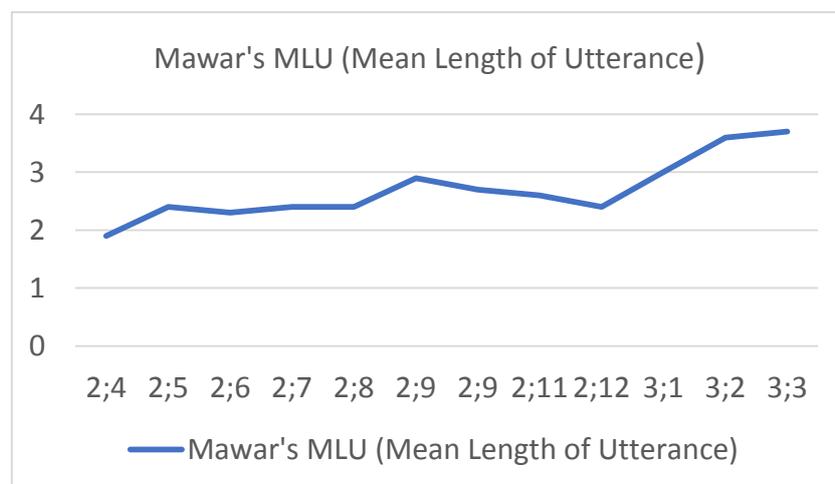


Figure 1. Mawar's MLU development between age 2;4 and 3;3

Mawar's MLU shows a trend of increase over the research period. This growth seems to correlate with the increase in the amount of exposure to L2, length of exposure, and the quality of exposure. As a higher MLU almost always indicates a higher level of language proficiency, we can fairly state that Mawar seems to become more and more proficient in L2 over time. During this particular period, our observations confirm that Mawar's interactions in authentic L2 environments significantly increases. For this reason, she receives relatively more native-like input than input from non-native sources. There is, however, a small decline in her MLU development between age 2;9 and 2;12, during which she travelled back to Indonesia for a family retreat and consequently received a relatively small amount of L2 input apart from interactions in L2 English with her non-native parents.

In contrast, Melati's performance in L2 production has not been positively reflected in her MLU data. A clear overview can be found in figure 2 below.

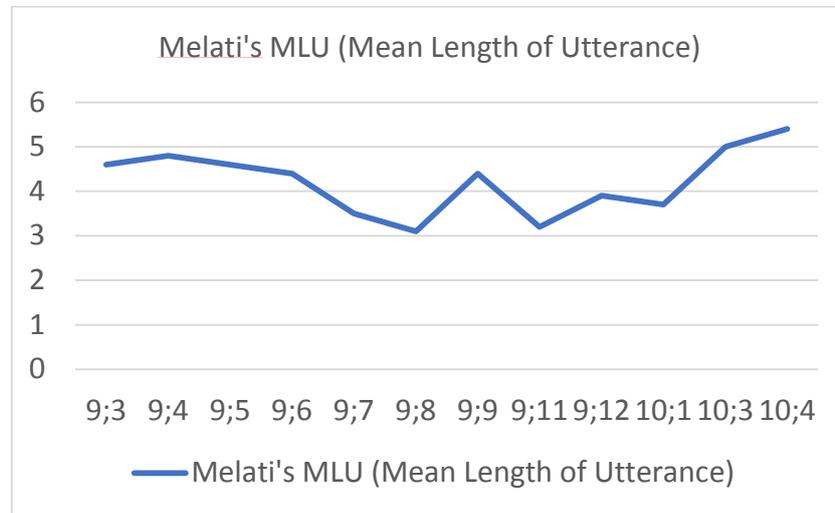


Figure 2. Melati's MLU development between age 9;3 and 10;4

As can be seen in figure 2 above, Melati's MLU shows a relatively small increase over the period of 12 months. Instead, the MLU counts fluctuate at several points of time, showing an unsteady growth of L2 acquisition. If we relate this data to the data of her L2 exposure previously shown in table 2, we may predict that this could be due to her amount and quality of exposure to L2 authentic sources. Based on the author's interview data with Melati's parents at three different points of time during the data collection period, it was confirmed that her exposure to English was mostly during school interactions and occasional conversation in English with parents. With this type of L2 interaction patterns, child L2 learners are usually forced to switch between the grammar system of L1 and L2 and are most likely exposed to any kinds of L2 errors produced by non-native parents. As a result, chances for them to produce longer and more grammatically correct utterances are reduced, accounting for the decrease in MLUs.

Errors

L2 errors are important predictors of language proficiency. In this particular section, we will discuss relevant L2 production data extracted from the two research subjects' interaction transcripts. As mentioned earlier in the paper, these data were collected over the course of 12 months through recording sessions, later transcribed for further analysis. This analysis is restricted to specific morphemes within the interest of the researcher, namely *agreement -s*, *regular and irregular verb*, *plural -s*, *copula be*, and *auxiliary be*. These morphemes were selected because they are inflected differently in L1 and L2. Thus different patterns in learner's production can be associated with specific grammatical rules in each language. This is particularly important to see whether errors are due to L1 influence or any other reasons.

To further discuss this, we will first review error data collected from the two research subjects, as provided in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Errors produced by Mawar and Melati

Subjects	Type of Suppliance	3sg -s	Reg. Vb	Irreg. Vb.	Plural -s	Cop be	Aux be
Mawar	Correct	7%	0%	48%	74%	88%	81%
	No. Suppl.	79%	100%	14%	26%	9%	15%
	Incorrect	14%	0%	38%	0%	3%	4%
Melati	Correct	16%	27%	61%	50%	88%	71%
	No. Suppl.	70%	70%	36%	50%	6%	25%
	Incorrect	14%	4%	3%	0%	6%	4%

Data provided in Table 3 above present important features of the two children's morphological inflection patterns. First, if we refer to the suppliance data, we can see that regular verb is not supplied at all by Mawar. This is not without any reason as according to prominent morpheme order studies such as Krashen's (1977) Natural Order of Acquisition and Brown's (1973) Stages of Syntactic and Morphological Development, regular past tense morpheme is usually acquired later at age 35-40 months of life (MLU 3.0-3.75), while irregular past verbs are usually present earlier. Mawar was between 2;4-3;3 at the time of data collection and her MLU was going to reach 3.0 near the final months of recording the data. For this reason, she was yet to produce morphemes featuring regular past tense. Thus such data must be excluded from the discussion. Let us now proceed with our discussion with the rest of our valid data.

From the suppliance data above, we learn that both children omit agreement morpheme *-s* at a relatively higher rate during the data collection period. Even if the morphemes were supplied in obligatory contexts, they were mostly inaccurate. These data provide us with thoughtful insights that there are at least two possible reasons to explain why this was happening. One would be avoidance, and the other is a lack of knowledge about the relevant morpheme. The latter seems to be more realistic as L1 Indonesian does not recognize any inflectional action for agreement morpheme *-s*. Even if the morpheme is present, they are almost always incorrectly supplied. Thus, L1 influence could be a reason behind the omission of this overt morphological feature.

A nearly similar case can also be found in the suppliance of regular past tense morpheme by Melati, where omission rate is relatively high. However, inflections seem to be more accurate when they are present. Both children display a relatively high rate of correct suppliance for the remaining four morphemes, except for Melati who is still struggling with supplying the plural *-s* morpheme. One fascinating finding that can be highlighted from the two research subjects is that Melati's omission rates seem to be relatively higher than those of Mawar for most of the morphemes. It appears to us that she prefers omitting the morpheme over attempting to supply one. What this data tells us is that she continues to apply L1 grammar system in which relevant morphological patterns are not overtly inflected. Thus we expect to find omissions of these morphemes to be more common in L2 production.

CONCLUSION

We have by now discussed different outcomes from the present study. Findings from the study indicate that exposures to parent's non-native language cannot be held responsible for errors produced by child L2 learners. Our MLU data reveal that language development on one of the research subjects continues to grow positively although she has constant interactions with non-native parents. This signifies the presence of errors. However, the study reflects that similar L2 errors produced by non-native parents can be traced in the language production of the research participants. If this was due to L1 and L2 differences, L1 transfer might be able to explain this. For this reason, we conclude that L1 plays an important role in the production of L2 errors.

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