

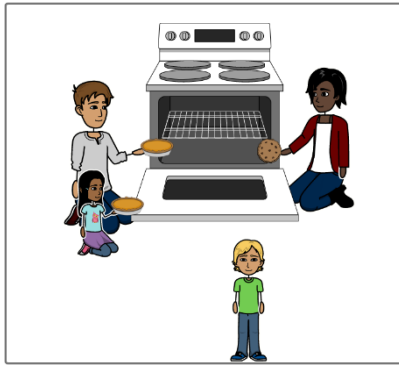
On the early phases of English foreign language learning: The role of lexical processing for the production of subject-verb agreement by German primary school students

When acquiring an additional language, learners bring L1 knowledge to the task that may be used as a springboard for L2 acquisition. One area where L1 influence can be found is within the lexicon, for example in the recognition of cognate words (e.g., *bake* /beɪk/ vs. *backen* /bakŋ/) which are processed faster than noncognate words (Brenders et al., 2011). Regarding grammar, several models argue in favor of wholesale transfer of the current state of an acquired language to the initial state of a new language (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996; Puig-Mayenco & Rothman, 2020). Based on these assumptions, German learners of English as an L2 are expected to apply their L1 knowledge of subject-verb agreement (SVA) to their L2 for free morphemes (auxiliaries) and bound morphemes (lexical verbs). However, in language production, especially under high processing load, SVA marking is often omitted by child and adult L2 learners with different L1 backgrounds (Geçkin & Haznedar, 2008) which is ascribed to a mapping problem of the morphological form onto the syntax as proposed by the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH; Prévost & White, 2000). This study investigates whether early-stage English L2 learners produce higher rates of target SVA inflectional morphology if they have to mark it on a cognate verb (e.g., ENG: *bake*, GER: *backen*) compared to a noncognate verb (e.g., ENG: *clean*, GER: *putzen*). In line with the Lexical Bottleneck Hypothesis (LBH; Hopp, 2018), it is assumed that lexical processing precedes syntactic parsing and feeds into it with an accelerated lexical retrieval allowing the learner to preserve resources for grammatical processing which could result in higher rates of target L2 forms. Against this backdrop, it is asked whether early-stage English L2 learners produce higher rates of target SVA when they have to mark it on a cognate verb compared to a noncognate verb.

To investigate lexical processing effects on target SVA production in early-stage L2 English, a preliminary sample of 25 German-speaking primary school students with a mean age of 9.7 years was tested after approximately 1.5 years of English instruction. The goal is to have a final sample of <50 participants by the end of June. Production of third-person singular and plural agreement morphology in simple present (bound morpheme) and present progressive (free morpheme) was elicited using sentence completion tasks. The students were aurally presented with short stories about a family. They were told that the last sentence of each story was incomplete and that the experimenter was interested in how they would complete it thereby eliciting the target verb including 3rd pers. singular and plural SVA. To support students' recognition of cognate words, the stories were presented together with a picture (Figure 1).

For the simple present, a generalized linear mixed model (GLMM) revealed a marginally significant effect of cognate word status ($z = -1.878, p = 0.06$). The preliminary results suggest that the students are supported in using target SVA in the simple present by accelerated lexical retrieval of cognate words, which is in line with the LBH (Hopp, 2018). However, no effect of cognate word status could be obtained for the present progressive which is explained in terms of SVA being marked on a free morpheme preceding the lexical verb for which lexical retrieval effects are expected. In sum, the findings corroborate the assumption of the MSIH that omissions of inflectional morphology can be ascribed to a mapping problem, occurring especially in contexts of high processing load. Reducing the processing load elsewhere in the computation, in line with the predictions by the LBH, can thus support the students in producing L2 inflectional morphology even in the early stages of acquisition.

Figure 1: Example of picture and aurally presented sentences



The mom, the dad, the girl, and the boy like to **bake**. There is a cake and a **cookie**. Look, here the dad and the girl **bake** the cake. The mom (*bakes the cookie*).

Note: words in bold were emphasized by the speaker to draw the students' attention toward the lexical material they needed to complete the final sentence. The fragment in italics is an example of a target sentence completion.

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