Object clitics in French second language acquisition

This paper reports on a pilot study that investigated knowledge of object clitics by native adult English L2 French speakers. English and French are different with respect to object pronominalization. In French, object pronominalization can be realised through a clitic or a weak pronoun. French clitics precede inflected verbs, leaving the canonical post-verbal argument position phonetically empty. However, English has only strong pronouns and they appear post verbally. These differences related to object pronominalization cause learnability problems for L2 learners. This study compares data from an experimental group of L1-English L2 learners of French (n=12) with a native French control group (n=8). The experimental group had intermediate learners. An acceptability judgment task, a preference task and a production task were employed to investigate knowledge of object clitics in French. In the acceptability judgment task, there were 20 object clitic tokens. Each experimental token consisted of a two-person short dialogue in French. One person replies to a question or a statement that the other person says. The participants were asked to judge the acceptability of the statements given by the second person in the dialogues. The grammatical tokens consisted of 5 tokens with a preverbal accusative object clitic (S-CI-V) and 5 tokens with a DP object (S-V-O). The ungrammatical tokens consisted of 5 tokens with a post-verbal accusative object clitic (S-V-CI) and 5 tokens in which the direct objects were omitted (SV_{no}O). The control group and the L2 learners rejected tokens with post-verbal accusative object clitics. However, L2 learners attributed a relatively high mean rating for the tokens with omitted direct objects (SV_{no}O). The 10 experimental tokens in the preference task tested two conditions: S-CI-V and * SV_{no}O. As expected, the control group demonstrated a very strong preference for the tokens with object clitics (S-CI-V). However, the L2 learners showed a relatively high preference for the ungrammatical tokens (*SV_{no}O). In the production task, 15 tokens focused on object clitics. The tokens were presented on a slide and on each slide, there was a picture of a person or people doing an activity. The participants were asked a question about the pictures and the experimenter required a response containing an object clitic. The task was audio recorded and later transcribed. The results revealed that the use of object clitic was not frequent in the two groups. However, the use of object clitics by the L2 learners was relatively low. They preferred overt objects than object clitics. With regards to L2 data, the most important observation was the relatively high use of responses in which direct object clitics were omitted. In general, the results also showed that the L2 learners accepted object omitted constructions in which clitics were also omitted. Similar results have been reported by Grüter & Crago (2011) by examining L2 child French. However, the results of the present study suggest that object clitic omission exists in the intermediate stage of adult L2 French acquisition.

Key words: French clitics, second language acquisition, object pronominalization

Reference: