Can online chat-based written activities increase usage of multiple second language structures?

What this research was about and why it is important

We investigated whether participating in an online chat-based activity led learners to increase their production of second language (L2) structures they would normally spontaneously avoid. The participants took part in an interactive picture-searching task in a written chat environment during which their partner wrote passive (*The man is followed by the boy*), dative (*The girl is giving the adult the bag*) and genitive sentences (*The mirror of the seller*). We tested whether learners would produce these sentence forms more than before (both during and after the task), even if they were not provided with instructions (i.e., in an implicit learning context). We also explored the effect of learners' prior knowledge of the structures and their conscious decisions to use the structures or not. The task did boost production of all structures. Additionally, having more prior knowledge of the structures and deliberately choosing to use them increased their production further. This study has important implications for L2 learning and teaching.

What the researchers did

- We tested Spanish native speakers, studying at a university in Spain, who were L2 learners of English.
- In an online, chat-based activity, participants interacted with an English native speaker during a picture-searching task.
- Participants were exposed to a series of passive, dative and genitives sentences through their partner's written descriptions of the picture.
- Given their native language, we expected the learners to be most familiar with the genitive form and the least familiar with dative forms.
- We measured participants' production of the three structures before the task (pre-test), immediately following exposure to them, and immediately after the task (post-test).
- Following the task, we asked if participants noticed the three structures during the task.
- We also asked participants if, during the task, they had deliberately chosen to use or avoid the structures, or if they had taken no such decision.
- We examined if increases in production of the structures would be the same for all structures.
- We examined if prior knowledge and conscious decisions influenced production of the structures.

What the researchers found

- The learners produced the three structures more both during the task and following the task, than before the task.
- These effects did not vary by structure.
- Participants were more likely to produce the structure they had the most prior knowledge of (i.e., genitives).
- Participants were influenced by conscious decisions – they were more likely to produce structures they chose to deliberately use.
- During the task, participants chose more often to use the structures than to avoid them.
- Most participants noticed all three structures.

Things to consider

- Implicit exposure to multiple L2 structures in a written, chat-based activity can boost L2 learners' production of dispreferred structures.
- This effect arises during interaction and persists beyond provision of the target structures suggesting that such activities may support language learning.
- Such chat-based activities also foster noticing of target L2 structures and sustain participants' motivation to use them.
- However, the post-test was completed immediately after the task. Future studies need to assess potential longer-term learning effects, e.g., by including delayed post-tests.
- Teachers may need to explicitly encourage learners to produce L2 structures they have less prior knowledge of.