Using tailored input-based instruction to improve second language oral production

What this research was about and why it is important

A major concern in the second language (L2) classroom is the relationship between a learner's first (L1) and second (L2) languages. Research has shown that these languages compete against each other, which can influence the rate and route of L2 grammar learning. Explicit instruction (EI) can be used to address this difficulty. However, we do not fully understand the effectiveness of different types of EI and practice in the comprehension or production of grammar. This study investigated whether providing EI about the learners' *L1* can reduce the negative influence of the L1 in L2 oral production. The study found that providing EI about a learner's L1 (English) helped the accuracy of L2 (French) oral production.

What the researchers did

- Learners were 69 English-speaking university learners of French, aged between 18-21, with approximately 700-800 hours of prior instruction in French.
- The target feature was the French *Imparfait* (IMP), a difficult feature for English speakers.
- The learners were randomly allocated to one of four groups:
  - An **L2+L1** group, which received grammar rules about the IMP and practice activities in both French and English, with *additional EI about English* expression of past ongoing and habitual events
  - An **L2+L1prac** group, which was similar to the L2+L1 group but without EI about English.
  - An **L2-only,** which received grammar rules and practice activities only in French.
  - A control group, which received no rules or special instruction.
- All three instructional groups included the same L2 French EI and practice.
- The instruction materials can be found here and here.
- For the L2 EI, learners were asked how they might express past ongoingness and habitual events in French, using a short video and images. For the L2 comprehension practice, learners heard or read a French sentence and had to distinguish between, for example, *present ongoingness* vs *past ongoingness*, or *past ongoingness* vs *past habitual*. The **L2+L1** group saw the same video and images as the L2 EI group, but received information about English.
- To measure learning, tests were given before, immediately after, and six weeks after the practice: 1) a picture-based oral narrative, in which learners told a story in French to describe a series of pictures; 2) an oral production test, in which learners described an action that was happening (IMP) before an intervening event occurred (past tense).

What the researchers found

- Immediately after instruction, all three treatment groups improved their oral use of IMP, for both ongoing and habitual events.
- Only the **L2+L1** group, which had received EI about English, kept these gains after six weeks.
- A previous study had shown that the **L2+L1** group also improved comprehension of ongoing and habitual IMP.

Things to consider

- The study showed that EI about the L1 can facilitate L2 learning. This was probably due to increasing learners' awareness of the concept of 'habituality' and how it is expressed by grammatical features.
- Teaching that emphasised the *functions* of verb inflections seemed helpful. The number of learners in each group was small. Also, the habitual and ongoing functions of the IMP were not elicited from one single test. For these reasons, the results should be considered tentative until further research is conducted.