

L1 transfer in Japanese EFL learners' interlanguage grammar

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The variability in L2 learners' production of inflectional morphology is a well-documented phenomenon (Lardiere 1998a, b, Ionin & Wexler 2002, White 2003, among others). However, there has been no clear agreement as to the source of such morphological inconsistency, although L1 effects have been discussed as a key factor affecting L2 performance in the literature. In this paper I investigate the issue of L1 transfer by considering the acquisition of two types of inflectional morpheme /-s/ in the interlanguage grammars of Japanese learners of English in study-abroad contexts, namely, 3rd singular agreement (3sg) /-s/ and noun plural /-s/. This study is crucial in assessing recent proposals such as the Representational Deficit Hypothesis (RDH) (Eubank 1994, Hawkins & Chan 1997, Hawkins & Liszka 2003) and the Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis (PTH) (Goad & White 2004, Goad 2008, White 2004, White 2008a) because the two types of /-s/ have the same phonological shape of different inflection (one on verbs and the other on nouns) in L2, but either morpheme does not exist in L1, as illustrated in (1) and (2).

(1) Watashi/Mary-wa mainichi ringo-o ikko/niko tabemasu.

(2) a. I eat one apple every day.

b. Mary eats2 two apples2 every day.

Our results indicate that (a) the Japanese EFL learners' production of 3sg /-s/ improves as their English proficiency increases, while their omission rate of plural /-s/ does not, (b) the learners' overall omission rates of the two affixes do not differ significantly, but as their proficiency goes up, the omission rate of 3sg /-s/ decreases more than that of plural /-s/, and (c) the acquisition of nominal /-s/ requires more time than that of verbal /-s/ in the case of Japanese speakers. These findings are not quite compatible with either the RDH or the PTH because the complete absence of both /-s/ should have occurred on the deficit account and because equal difficulty should have been induced for both inflection on the prosodic account, contrary to facts. In short, L1 transfer affects learners' performance on L2 morphology, for which one particular hypothesis alone appears to be unable to provide a plausible account (White 2008b).

These results will be compared with the production of past tense /-ed/, the morpheme being present in L1 Japanese.