

**B** **H**UNGAROLOGISCHE  
BEITRÄGE

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Universität Jyväskylä 1994



# **B**HUNGAROLOGISCHE **BEITRÄGE**

PROBLEME DES SPRACHERWERBS

Herausgegeben von

László Keresztes  
Tuomo Lahdelma  
Sándor Maticsák  
Christoph Parry

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## **Zum Geleit**

Im Frühjahr 1994 wurde von der Hungarologie-Einheit der Universität Jyväskylä und dem Hungarologischen Zentrum der Universität Hamburg ein Projekt eingeleitet, das zum Ziel hat, zu untersuchen, wie Sprecher verschiedener Sprachen Ungarisch lernen. Unser Ausgangspunkt ist die Auffassung, daß der Spracherwerb einen soziokulturellen Prozeß darstellt. Dieser war Gegenstand eines am 9. und 10. März 1994 veranstalteten Seminars an der Universität Jyväskylä, wo sowohl allgemeine Fragen des Fremdspracherwerbs als auch gewisse sprachspezifische Probleme erörtert wurden. Mit dem vorliegenden Band der Hungarologischen Beiträge stellen wir den Ertrag dieses Seminars vor und danken zugleich den Sprachforschern der Universität Jyväskylä und den ausländischen Partnern der Hungarologie in Jyväskylä, die durch ihre wertvolle Mitarbeit das Seminar möglich machten.

Jyväskylä am 15. November 1994

Tuomo Lahdelma

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**ALLGEMEINE FRAGEN  
DES SPRACHERWERBS**



**Learning a Typologically Different Foreign Language:  
Some Results of an Experiment in the Acquisition  
of Semiartificial Finnish by Native Speakers of English**

**Riikka ALANEN**

**1. General Background**

How do native speakers of an Indo-European language, in this case English, go about learning an agglutinative language? How successful are they as beginning language learners in acquiring and using inflected word forms to express semantic and grammatical relationships in a language that is typologically very different from their native language or any other foreign languages they might already know? In this paper the results of a Finnish language learning experiment will be shortly discussed; an attempt is also made to explore issues involved in second language learning in general.<sup>1</sup> The experiment was conducted in the United States at the University of Hawaii, Manoa. The learners were all native speakers of English. The target language was Finnish, but since certain modifications were made to it, mainly for methodological reasons, it will be more correct to refer to the target language as semi-artificial or partly artificial Finnish.

In Finland, the problems the Finns have as learners of Indo-European languages, especially English, have been widely discussed. Sajavaara and Lehtonen (see eg. Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1983; Sajavaara 1986; Sajavaara & Lehtonen 1989) have described the problems the Finnish language learners encounter in the processing of ambiguous, grammatically acceptable and unacceptable English and German sentences by contrasting their performance with that of native speakers. Ringbom (1987) in discussing the role

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed analysis of the experiment, see Alanen 1992.

of L1 in foreign language learning examined the differences between Finns and Swedish-speaking Finns in learning English. For various reasons, there have been considerably fewer studies conducted on the second language acquisition of typologically very different languages such as Finnish, Hungarian or Turkish in Europe or Japanese and Chinese in Asia by native speakers of English or other Indo-European languages. With changing times, the need to know more about the processes that go into the acquisition of languages once considered 'exotic' in the largely Indo-European speaking West has become important not just to second language researchers but teachers and designers of language programs, as well.

On the basis of structural differences between Finnish and Indo-European languages certain hypotheses can be made about potentially problematic areas for learners of Finnish: grammar, which uses, to a foreign eye or ear, a complex system of endings, or 'cases', to indicate grammatical and semantic relations in a sentence; lexis, which on the surface has few items in common with Indo-European languages; and, in phonology, certain systematic sound changes that word stems undergo when inflected (Karlsson 1987: 14–15).

## **2. Experiment**

### **2.1. Background to the experiment**

The primary purpose of the experiment was not to investigate how L1 English speakers learn Finnish. Rather, the aim was to investigate the role of consciousness and attention in second language acquisition through analyzing the effects of input enhancement and rule presentation on the learning process. In other words, the focus of the study was to investigate the relationship between certain features of formal instruction and second language acquisition. One aim of the study in particular was to investigate whether incidental learning of structural language elements was possible. Still, some of the issues involved have a direct bearing on the problems found in the acquisition of Finnish as a second or foreign language in general. The reader is asked to bear in mind, though, that most of the analyses made below are strictly *post hoc* in nature.

There were some advantages in selecting Finnish as the target language: First, by choosing a language that no one had any knowledge of, the role of previous knowledge, which is usually very difficult to control for in any SLA experiment, could be taken care of. That the experiment took place in Hawaii further guaranteed that the subjects could have no exposure to Finnish other than through formal instruction during the learning sessions. Secondly, typological differences between English and Finnish made it an interesting target: How would native speakers of English react to the linguistic input of such exotic nature?

In the following, not all of the results of this learning experiment will be discussed; instead, the focus will primarily be on describing how the learners succeeded in processing and incorporating foreign language input while at the same making some comments on how the manipulation of linguistic input and explicit rule presentation affected this process.

Two notions are of particular importance here, or, indeed, in any SLA process in general. According to Chaudron (1985), *input* usually refers to the target language material the learner is exposed to during the process of language learning whereas *intake* is that part of the input the learners has actually incorporated into his or her developing knowledge system, in other words, has learned. Van Patten (1989) defines intake as a subset of the input that the learner perceives and processes. Furthermore, there are certain factors that influence both what learners actually perceive and how they process the knowledge they have thus gained in order to incorporate it in their knowledge system. One of these factors is very likely formal instruction. Long (1988) has suggested that it is the way that instruction directs a language learner's focus on form that appears to be behind most successful second language learning experiences. In such cases, language learners have been directed to pay attention to, or notice, the connection between linguistic form and its meaningful use in context. Doughty's (1991) findings on the acquisition of relative clauses by non-native speakers of English also seem to suggest that the saliency of target structures influences learning outcomes: highlighting of the target structures while asking the learners to concentrate on the meaning seemed to have a positive effect on the acquisition of relative clauses even if the learners were not given

explicit grammar instruction. It has also been suggested that a certain amount of attention or noticing is necessary for learning to take place (eg. Schmidt 1990). Schmidt sees noticing as the private experiencing of focal awareness. It can be operationally defined as availability for verbal report, subject to certain conditions (Schmidt 1990: 132).

In the experiment, then, an attempt was made to influence the focus of learners' attention, first, by manipulating the linguistic input by enhancing or not enhancing the learning targets embedded in the running text by using italics; and, secondly, by rule presentation, that is, giving the learners explicit information about the rules governing the use of the learning targets. It is to be noted that the subjects were not asked to learn grammatical structures or phonological rules as such; on the contrary, every attempt was made during the experiment to encourage the learners to concentrate on the content. In this respect, any results that showed the learners having acquired the target structures could be seen as indicative of incidental learning, if the term incidental learning is understood to refer to non-intentional learning.

## 2.2. Method

### 2.2.1. Subjects

36 students at the University of Hawaii, Manoa, volunteered for the study. All were native speakers of English who had previous foreign language learning experience.

### 2.2.2. Learning targets and materials

The learning targets were embedded in two short descriptive passages in Finnish. The targets were from two different levels of language: (1) locative suffixes *-ssa* ('in'), eg. *kupissa* 'in the cup'; *-ssa* ('on'), eg. *kukassa*; and *-lla* ('on'), eg. *poydalla* 'on the table'; and (2) numerous examples of four types of consonant gradation (*tt-* > *t*, *kk-* > *k*, *pp-* > *p*, and *t-* > *d*). In the case of locative endings students were exposed to and given meaning of both the base form and the inflected form. Similarly, the passages always contained both the

base form and the inflected form, with a word stem that had undergone consonant alteration such as *matto* – *matolla*; *kukka* – *kukassa*; *kuppi* – *kupissa*; *poyta* – *poydalla*. Locative suffixes have a more or less clearly definable semantic content whereas consonant gradation is a purely formal, linguistically conditioned phenomenon in Finnish. The passages contained a large number of sentences with locative expressions such as (the learning targets printed in italics; sentences not shown in actual size or order):

Kato on pisi.	'The city is busy'
Mikko ja Liisa on kadossa.	'Mikko and Liisa are in the city'
Greippi ja banaani on bouliissa.	'A grapefruit and a banana are in the bowl'
Poyta on matolla.	'The table is on the mat'
Vati ja kuppi on myos poydalla.	'A plate and a cup are also on the table'
Meloni on vadilla.	'A melon is on the plate'

Some modifications were made to the target language although its agglutinative nature was preserved; experiments with semi-artificial language have been conducted at least by Hulstijn (1989). For example, some of the lexical items used in the learning materials were specifically designed for the experiment, mainly because the genuine Finnish words were considered too long or phonetically and orthographically too difficult. The word *kato*, for example, was created for this experiment alone and given the meaning 'city'; the Finnish word meaning 'city' is actually *kaupunki*. Furthermore, „cognates” or „loan-words” were created where none existed before, again to ease the load on the learners' memory and processing capacity: *bouli* 'bowl' and *pisi* 'busy' are examples of this. Word order also remained unchanged (SV) although in Finnish it is free; in some parts of the passages the inverted word order would have been more natural. Umlaut-vowels *ä* and *ö* were also eliminated and *a* and *o* used instead.

### 2.2.3. Treatment and hypotheses

Subjects were divided into four treatment groups (N=9): Control, Enhance, Rule, and Rule & Enhance. Their treatment varied as follows: Control was given the learning materials only, without enhancements, Enhance received the input with the enhanced targets, Rule was given the learning materials and a short explanation of the use of the locative suffixes and the occurrence of consonant gradation in Finnish, and Rule & Enhance received both the rules and the enhanced learning materials. The following hypothesis was made about the order of learning outcomes: Control < Enhance < Rule < Rule & Enhance. In other words, it was hypothesized that not only would those two learner groups that received rule instruction on the learning targets perform better than those with no such instruction but also that the learner groups that received enhanced input would outperform their peers.

### 2.2.4. Procedure

All students attended two lessons of Finnish. The lessons took place in the language laboratory of the University of Hawaii Language Study Center. Each lesson consisted of a 15-minute study session, during which the students read a short descriptive text in Finnish with a picture and a Finnish-English glossary attached. Those subjects who received the rules were given additional five minutes to study them. The students were also asked to think aloud during the learning sessions. These protocols were recorded and later analyzed; unfortunately, any detailed discussion of these self-reports is beyond the scope of this paper. All subjects were told that there would be questions after the study session about the content of the passage but no mention was made that at the end of the experiment they would also be tested on the production of syntactic constructions included in the passages. After each lesson the subjects were given a short reading comprehension test and a 12-item word translation task in which the subjects were asked to translate Finnish words into English (again, the emphasis in this task was on meaning). After the second and final session, however, the subjects were also given a 33-item sentence completion task in which they were asked to complete a Finnish sentence with a word in brackets so that the sentence would contain a place expression. The

meanings of the lexical items included in this task were also given to the students. Finally, the students were also asked to restate or give rules that in their opinion would govern the occurrence of locative endings and consonant alteration in the passages and judge the grammaticality of a number of Finnish sentences containing locative expressions. In the following, the results of the sentence completion task only will be discussed in more detail.

### 2.3. Results and discussion

The scores of the sentence completion task shown in Table 1 below partially support the hypothesis. The scores show how many instances of target-like structures the learners were able to supply in contexts in which they were required.

Table 1. Raw scores for suffixes *-ssa* ('in'), *-ssa* ('on') and *-lla* ('on') and four types of consonant gradation for all subject groups.

		Control (N=9)	Enhance (N=9)	Rule (N=9)	Rule&Enhance (N=9)
<i>-ssa</i> ('in')	k = 9				
	mean	4.00	2.78	7.00	7.11
	sd	3.97	2.86	2.06	2.03
<i>-ssa</i> ('on')	k = 15				
	mean	6.00	5.67	8.89	7.78
	sd	6.87	5.56	4.70	4.84
<i>-lla</i> ('on')	k = 9				
	mean	.22	.33	4.56	5.56
	sd	.44	1.00	3.32	3.75
<i>tt- &gt; t</i>	k = 6				
	mean	.56	.78	4.33	3.67
	sd	1.33	1.30	2.44	2.24
<i>kk- &gt; k</i>	k = 7				
	mean	1.22	1.00	5.11	5.22
	sd	2.22	2.29	2.09	2.05
<i>pp- &gt; p</i>	k = 6				
	mean	1.22	.44	4.44	3.78
	sd	1.99	1.33	2.35	2.11
<i>t- &gt; d</i>	k = 4				
	mean	.44	.33	.44	1.56
	sd	.88	1.00	1.01	1.67

ANOVA revealed that in case of *-ssa* ('in') ( $F = 5.27$ ;  $p = .01$ ) and *-lla* ('on') ( $F = 10.67$ ;  $p = .00$ ), the difference between the group means was statistically significant. In case of *-lla* ('on'), the strength of association as measured by eta squared revealed that 50% of the variance in the scores was due to the treatment. As for *tt- > t*, *kk- > k* and *pp- > p* alteration, ANOVA revealed extremely significant differences between the group means; 45% to 50% of the variance in the scores as measured by eta squared was accounted for by the treatment.

The raw scores indicate the following order of learning outcomes: Control ~ Enhance < Rule ~ Rule & Enhance. Both 'rule-based' groups performed remarkably better than the 'meaning-based' groups. Thus, input enhancement did not seem to have the desired effect. However, a more detailed analysis of the learners' performance revealed that input enhancement had affected the learners' productions. The subjects in Enhance produced significantly fewer  $\emptyset$ -forms than those in Control, ie. they had made an attempt at producing locative forms although in most cases their productions were not exactly target-like. Table 2 below shows some of the most frequently produced forms.

Table 2. Four most frequently produced forms in all four subject groups.

Suffix		Control	Enhance	Rule	Rule& Enhance
$\emptyset$	mean	12.33	.78	.00	.00
	sd	15.70	2.33	.00	.00
<i>-ssa</i>	mean	12.89	11.33	18.11	17.44
	sd	13.58	11.19	7.96	6.09
<i>-lla</i>	mean	.67	.33	8.67	12.00
	sd	1.32	1.00	5.17	7.89
stem+	mean	1.00	.33	3.11	.33
	sd	2.65	1.00	5.80	.71

The results of ANOVA showed that the difference between the groups was significant (in case of *-lla* ('on'),  $F = 13.38$ ;  $p = .00$ ; in case of  $\emptyset$ -form,  $F = 5.15$ ;  $p = .01$ ). The strength of association as measured by eta squared revealed that as much as 56% of the variance in the occurrence of *-lla* ('on') and 33% of the variance in the use of  $\emptyset$ -form was due to the treatment.

The behavior of Control and Enhance was most interesting since these were both 'meaning-based' groups, in other words, groups that were not given rules or explanations about the structural properties of the Finnish language. It appeared that unless their attention was somehow directed to suffixes as a means of expressing location, the subjects did not learn them, or, indeed, may not even have become aware of them. One subject in Control, when expressly asked what the sentence she had just completed meant (she had written *Banaani on bouli* instead *Banaani on boulissa*), answered, „The banana is in the bowl”. Furthermore, the students showed a tendency to use *-ssa* as a sort of generic place marker. This in itself may have been due to frequency of input: the ratio of *-ssa* endings to *-lla* endings in the linguistic input was 2 : 1. The use of *-ssa* in Finnish in cases where English would use the preposition *on* probably contributed to this since it was more difficult to establish clear semantic boundaries and functions between the suffixes; hence the oversimplification of the system.

The rule-based groups behaved differently: instead of oversimplification, their performance bore traces of L1 transfer. Especially the subjects in Rule & Enhance had a tendency to overapply *-lla* to cases where English would have used the preposition *on* and Finnish *-ssa* ('on'). Interestingly, the subjects in the rule-based groups had been told about the two meanings of *-ssa* in Finnish; they had also been given examples of this in addition to being given the following 'rule' on the use of *-lla*: „The ending *-lla* is used to refer to (1) static position on top of an object. For example, *matolla* (*matto* = 'mat' + *-lla* 'on') can be roughly translated as 'on the mat' [...]" That the subjects still tended to use *-lla* indicates that the 'grammar' of Finnish they were relying on showed the effects of L1 transfer. Again, this finding in itself is not surprising since earlier studies have indicated that instances of L1 transfer can be found in greater numbers in the speech of beginning language learners.

On the basis of learning outcomes, the acquisition of the purely linguistically conditioned consonant gradation was very difficult for the meaning-based groups. Only the groups that had been given rules showed any evidence of having learned it.

The acquisition of lexicon was not the focus of this experiment. Still, two word translation tasks were used in the experiment to focus the learners' attention on content rather than on form. The analysis of the tasks shows that the performance of the subjects on these tasks varied greatly according to the type of items they were asked to translate. It turned out, again not surprisingly, that the learners were much better able to give meanings to those Finnish items that resembled L1 items. The average score for „cognates” included in the word translation tests varied from 11.1 to 11.9 (out of 13) among the four learner groups whereas the average score for Finnish words varied from 1.6 to 3.4 (out of 11).

### 3. Conclusion

The results of the experiment seem to provide support for the claim that, at least for incidental learning of structural language elements to take place, attention to form at input encoding is a sufficient condition. The fact that all learners in Enhance had acquired a suffix, regardless of its form, in contrast to those learners in Control who had not, suggests that input enhancement had some effect on the learning process. The findings of Doughty (1991) were thus at least partially supported. Long's (1988) suggestion of focus on form as a factor underlying the effect of instruction is also further supported.

The results indicate that explicit instruction was especially efficient in focusing the learners' attention to structures that were either less frequent in the input such as *-lla* ('on') or purely formal such as consonant alteration. The overall effect was quite remarkable, considering the very short time the students in the rule-based groups had to study the rules.

As to the differences between instructed and non-instructed learner groups, similar results have been reported for example by Pica (1983), who studied the acquisition of grammatical morphemes such as English plural *-s* in the speech of adult ESL speakers in

three different learning contexts (naturalistic, instructed, and mixed). She found, for example, that instruction seemed to trigger oversuppliance of grammatical morphology in linguistic context in which it was not needed whereas those learners who had acquired the morphemes under naturalistic learning conditions showed a tendency to omit plural *-s* in linguistically redundant environments. In the present study, the errors made by the students in those groups that received explicit grammatical instruction were also different in nature from those committed by the two groups with no such instruction. Overgeneralization of the more frequent form (*-ssa*) was most common in Control and Enhance whereas errors of interlingual origin were much more frequent among the students in Rule and Rule & Enhance. Thus, although explicit instruction had an overall beneficial effect on the acquisition, or, rather, incidental learning of such structural language elements, it also seemed to have some potential drawbacks such as the danger of inducing overreliance on L1 routines. Overgeneralization, omission and L1 transfer work equally well even if the target language is a more exotic Finnish.

The results also give indirect support for the problematic areas in the Finnish language: lexis, in particular, is difficult to learn. The idea of endings to express semantic and grammatical relations, although alien, did not appear to be intimidating to learners, at least not in such a highly controlled language learning situation as the experiment was. However, it also appeared that unless their attention was in one way or another drawn to it, the learners did not necessarily become aware of the function of suffixes in Finnish.

It also appears that the focus of learners' attention is very important. The role of the teacher, learning materials, and formal instruction in general can be very important in directing focus of attention but it is by no means essential: the learners' own hypotheses about the nature of the input, the things they paid attention to clearly affected their learning outcomes. On the other hand, it appears that at least in a foreign language learning situation with controlled input, formal instruction can accelerate the learning process, at least in the short term.

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