Abstract English

The primary aim of this study is to explore whether the nature of processing English plural inflections is lexical or grammatical. Secondly, I want to ascertain whether second language learners change their processing paths in the course of language acquisition. I hypothesize that plural processing is not a strictly grammatical processing event and that there are various factors influencing the processing. In order to test my assumption I developed two reaction time experiments to test the underlying factors that I believe influence plural processing.

In the first experiment, a lexical decision task, native speakers and learners of English decide whether 400 test items are real or nonsense words. All real words relevant to the study are matched for frequency and singular or plural dominance. Reaction times for the decision process are recorded.

In the second experiment, a grammatical judgment task, the subjects decide whether a given noun phrase is grammatically correct. The real purpose of the experiment is to see how long it takes the subjects to match a dual concept with either a plural determiner or a dual determiner.

My experiments show that plural processing is not strictly grammatical. Instead, a number of factors such as frequency, plural dominance, and conceptual association play a role in plural processing, rendering it either more lexical or more grammatical. My findings also show that there is no strict division between language learners and native speakers in terms of plural processing. Instead, the two native-speaker groups differ substantially in their processing behavior. In addition, the learner groups do not show any gradual progression towards native speaker processing during their schooling.