

Tentative Title of Dissertation:

Adult L2 Processing and Acquisition of the English Present Perfect

Dissertation Abstract:

Using an online reading task, this research investigates the processing and acquisition of the English present perfect (e.g., I have written) by instructed, adult nonnative speakers (NNS) of English. The immediate objective of this research is to evaluate two competing theoretical perspectives that advocate opposing paths of acquisition for the present perfect.

The complexity-driven account proposes that acquisition occurs in order of increasing semantic-syntactic complexity: the present perfect is first used in simple past contexts and is extended to contexts of increasing complexity. The prototype-driven account suggests that acquisition occurs through bootstrapping based on shared semantic features: the present perfect is first used with semantically related verbs in unique contexts before it is generalized to others. Both perspectives find considerable support using offline methods (those that evaluate metalinguistic knowledge), but no research has investigated them using online methods (those that measure real-time processing). This research addresses this gap in the research using a novel online task to further substantiate existing data.

Online data are collected from NNSs of three proficiency levels using a self-paced reading task (SPRT) and compared to those from native speakers. The sentences used in the SPRT are manipulated for grammatical tense, telicity (having an inherent endpoint) and current relevance (being more relevant to the present than the past). Facilitation and inhibition patterns from two task administrations disentangle the predictions of the two competing accounts. It is hypothesized that lower proficiency participants will adhere more to the complexity account and those at higher proficiencies will adhere to the prototype account.