Unlearning of the Verb Movement Parameter in Second Language Acquisition

Chandeera Gunawardena

University of York/ University of Kelaniya

<chandeera.gunawardena@york.ac.uk >

Abstract – This study investigates the unlearning of the verb movement parameter by second language (L2) learners whose first language (L1) is Sinhala. Adverb placement in English is relatively free. However, English shows certain contrasts with respect to adverb placement. In English, adverbs may appear between the subject and the finite verb. However, English does not allow adverbs between the finite verb and the direct object. In Sinhala, adverbs may appear between the subject and the finite verb. Additionally, adverbs may intervene between the finite verb and the direct object in Sinhala. This cross-linguistic difference can be traced to one parametric difference between the two languages, namely the verb movement parameter. Verbs in Sinhala raise from the verb phrase (VP) to Inflection. As a result, the finite verb ends up preceding adverbs in Sinhala. Therefore, Sinhala allows adverbs between the finite verb and the direct object. In English, verbs remain within the VP. As a result, English does not allow adverbs between the finite verb and the direct object. In order to learn the correct adverb placement in English, L1-Sinhala L2-English learners will have to unlearn verb movement in English. The data were collected via an acceptability judgement task and a production task. The two tasks tested knowledge of adverb placement in English. L1-Sinhala–L2-English learners (n=24) participated as an experimental group, whereas L1-English speakers (n=17) served as a control group. The overall results suggest that the L2 English learners accept adverbs between the finite verb and the direct object due to L1 transfer.

Keywords: L2-English learners, verb movement parameter, L1 transfer

Department of English Language Teaching
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Rajarata University 0f Sri Lanka

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