

# **Structural priming and second language learning**

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# Abstract

## Structural priming and second language learning

This thesis investigates L2 structural priming in learners of English and the possible role of structural priming in second language acquisition. Three picture description production priming experiments were carried out in which speakers were exposed to prime sentences exhibiting a specific target structure. A pre- and post-test design was deployed to measure learning effects. In Experiment 1, fifty two L2 English speakers took part in a structural priming experiment targeting the production of get passives (e.g., *the woman got arrested*). Priming and learning effects were weak and were manifested in production of non-*get* passives. In contrast, in Experiment 2, where thirty eight L2 English speakers took part in another structural priming experiment targeting the production of stranded prepositions in relative clauses (e.g., *a bed is something you sleep on*), priming and learning effects were strong. The findings of learning through structural priming are interpreted as evidence of implicit learning of L2 structure. However, when the stranded preposition structure was primed in a different sentential context (i.e., *the bed was too uncomfortable to sleep on*) in a third experiment (n=40) only a weak priming effect emerged and there appeared to be no significant learning effect. These disparate findings suggest that the strength of L2 structural priming and subsequent learning effects might be modulated by the target structure. Implications for second language teaching and learning and theories of second language acquisition are discussed.





# Table of contents

Acknowledgements.....	III
Abstract.....	VI
Certification.....	VIII
Chapter contents.....	X
Table and Figures.....	XVII
Abbreviations.....	XIX
<b>Chapter 1. Structural priming: An introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Research questions.....	3
1.3 Introduction to structural priming.....	3
1.4 Experimental contexts of structural priming.....	6
1.4.1 Production priming.....	7
1.4.2 Comprehension priming.....	11
1.4.3 Structures investigated in priming studies.....	12
1.5 Characteristics of structural priming.....	15
1.6 Mechanism and function of structural priming.....	23
1.6.1 Structural priming as temporary activation.....	24
1.6.2 Priming as implicit learning.....	24
1.7 L2 structural priming.....	30
1.7.1 Lexical overlap.....	36
1.7.2 Strength of priming.....	37
1.7.3 Implicit second language learning.....	37
1.8 Definitions of key constructs.....	38
1.8.1 Learning.....	38
1.8.2 Implicit learning.....	39



1.9 Importance of the research.....	41
1.9.1 Learning through repetition.....	42
1.9.2 Computer-assisted language learning.....	43
1.10 Organisation of the thesis.....	43
<b>Chapter 2. Methodology.....</b>	<b>45</b>
2.1 Introduction.....	45
2.2 Overview.....	45
2.3 Participants.....	45
2.4 Choice of Methodology – Oral production priming.....	46
2.5 Treatment phase.....	49
2.6 Lexical contributions.....	50
2.7 Overall design.....	50
2.8 Control / experimental groups design.....	51
2.9 Pre-test / Post-test design.....	51
2.10 Spacer task.....	53
2.11 Presentation of stimuli.....	53
2.12 Coding of responses.....	53
2.13 Participant Awareness.....	54
2.13.1 Minimising speakers’ conscious awareness: distraction and cover tasks.....	54
2.13.2 Assessing participants’ levels of conscious awareness of the prime stimuli.....	57
2.13.3 Post-task questions for participants.....	58
<b>Chapter 3. Experiment 1: A study to find out if L2 English learners get primed.....</b>	<b>59</b>
3.1 Introduction.....	59
3.2 Strength of priming effects for passives.....	62

3.3 Method.....	65
3.3.1 Participants.....	66
3.3.2 Materials.....	67
3.3.2.1 <i>Treatment phase</i> .....	67
3.3.2.2 <i>Pre- and post-tests</i> .....	70
3.3.2.3 <i>Cover task</i> .....	71
3.3.3 Procedure.....	72
3.3.3.1 <i>The main task</i> .....	72
3.3.3.2 <i>Post-task questions for participants</i> .....	73
3.4 Results.....	73
3.4.1 Coding of responses.....	73
3.4.2 Awareness of participants.....	80
3.4.3 Production of GP.....	80
3.4.4 Production of <i>be</i> passives (beP).....	81
3.4.5 Production of all passives (allP).....	82
3.4.6 Production of other passives.....	84
3.5 Discussion.....	84
3.5.1 Self-priming.....	88
3.5.2 Effect of the cover task.....	89
3.5.3 Individual differences in structural priming effects.....	90
3.5.4 Effect of participants' L1.....	92
3.6 Conclusion.....	95
<b>Chapter 4. Experiment 2: A preposition is something you can end a sentence with.....</b>	<b>97</b>
4.1 Introduction.....	97
4.2 Hypotheses and research questions.....	101
4.3 Method.....	102
4.3.1 Design.....	102
4.3.2 Participants.....	103

4.3.3 Materials.....	104
4.3.3.1 Pre- and post-tests.....	104
4.3.3.2 Treatment phase.....	106
4.3.3.3 Intervening spacer task.....	108
4.3.3.4 Delayed post-test.....	108
4.3.3.5 Sentence recognition test.....	109
4.3.4 Procedure.....	110
4.3.5 Scoring.....	110
4.4 Results.....	112
4.4.1 Production of stranded prepositions.....	113
4.4.2 Production of null preps.....	114
4.4.3 Effect of preposition overlap on priming.....	115
4.4.4 Delayed post-test.....	117
4.4.4.1 Production of stranded prepositions.....	117
4.4.4.2 Production of null preps.....	118
4.5 Discussion.....	120
4.6 Conclusion.....	126
<b>Chapter 5. Experiment 3: These prepositions were too strange to end a sentence with.....</b>	<b>127</b>
5.1 Introduction.....	127
5.1.1 English tough movement.....	128
5.2 Hypotheses and research questions.....	131
5.3 Method.....	132
5.3.1 Design.....	132
5.3.2 Participants.....	132
5.3.3 Materials.....	133
5.3.3.1 Pre- and post-tests.....	134
5.3.3.2 Treatment phase.....	136
5.3.3.3 Controlling for conscious awareness.....	138

5.3.3.4 Procedure.....	139
5.3.3.5 Scoring.....	140
5.4 Results.....	141
5.4.1 Production of stranded prepositions.....	143
5.4.2 Production of null preps.....	145
5.4.3 Participants' conscious awareness.....	147
5.5 Discussion.....	147
5.5.1 Summary of the findings.....	147
5.5.2 Comparison of findings of Experiment 3 with Experiment 2.....	150
5.6 Conclusion.....	155
<b>Chapter 6. General discussion.....</b>	<b>157</b>
6.1 Introduction.....	157
6.2 Implications of the findings for structural priming theories.....	157
6.3 L2 structural priming and SLA theories.....	158
6.3.1 Implicit learning of grammatical structure.....	158
6.3.2 Input and awareness in second language acquisition.....	161
6.3.3 Processability Theory.....	161
6.3.4 Acquisition by Processing.....	163
6.3.5 The role of output in SLA.....	165
6.3.6 Structural priming as the seed of learning.....	165
6.4 L2 structural priming and L2 pedagogy.....	166
6.4.1 Structural priming and repetitive practice.....	166
6.4.2 Structural drills and language learning.....	168
6.4.3 Substitution drills and structural priming.....	170
6.4.4 Structural priming, drills and rote repetition.....	175
6.4.5 Possible pedagogical tasks incorporating structural priming.....	178
6.4.6 Structural priming and computer-assisted language learning (CALL).....	180
6.4.7 Pre-task priming and communicative language teaching.....	184
6.4.8 Structural priming, cultural background and learning style.....	186

6.5 Limitations of the present investigation and future research opportunities.....	187
6.5.1 Randomisation of items.....	187
6.5.2 Homogeneity of participants.....	187
6.5.3 Assessment of long-term learning.....	187
6.5.4 Conscious awareness.....	189
6.6 Adapting L1 structural priming methods to L2 contexts (and other methodological issues).....	191
6.6.1 Number of stimuli.....	192
6.6.2 Duration of the priming session.....	193
6.6.3 Individual differences in L2 priming.....	193
6.6.4 Need for control groups in L2 structural priming research.....	195
6.7 Further research opportunities in L2 structural priming.....	196
6.7.1 Structural alternations for future L2 structural priming experiments.....	196
6.7.2 Adapting the experiments in this thesis to dialogic contexts.....	197
6.8 Conclusion.....	197
<b>References.....</b>	<b>199</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>215</b>
Appendix 3.1 Experiment 1: Test items.....	215
Appendix 3.2 Experiment 1: Vocabulary cover task.....	217
Appendix 3.3 Experiment 1: Information sheet and consent form for experimental group participants.....	219
Appendix 3.4 Experiment 1: Information sheet and consent form for control group participants.....	223
Appendix 3.5 Experiment 1: Post-task questions for participants.....	225
Appendix 4.1 Experiment 2: Test items.....	226

Appendix 4.2 Experiment 2: Information sheet for experimental group participants.....	229
Appendix 4.3 Experiment 2: Information sheet for control group Participants.....	231
Appendix 5.1 Experiment 3: Test items.....	233
Appendix 5.2 Experiment 3: Information sheet for participants.....	235
Appendix 5.3 Experiment 3: Post-task questions for participants.....	237

## List of Tables

Table 3.1. Proportion (as percentages) of target descriptions as a function of passive type (SDs in brackets)

Table 4.1. Mean percentages of null prep acceptance in questions, relative clauses and passives reported in previous studies of L2 English learners (\* *wh*-questions only)

Table 4.2. Data summary for % suppliance (standard deviations in brackets) of stranded prepositions, null preps and other responses for experimental (Exp.) and control (Contr.) groups in all phases of the experiment (The control group did not take part in the delayed post-test.) \* total suppliance does not add to 100 due to rounding error.

Table 5.1. Proportion (as a %) of stranded preposition and null prep sentences produced by participants in response to the test stimuli in the pre-test, post-test and priming phase (standard deviations in brackets).

Table 6.2. Comparison of substitution drills and structural priming tasks

## List of Figures

Figure 3.1. Example test triplet

Figure 3.2. Example filler triplet

Figure 3.3. Example pre- and post-test pictures

Figure 3.4. Breakdown of passive production by experimental and control groups as a function of test (mean proportion of target pictures)

Figure 3.5. Production of beP by experimental and control groups as a function of test (mean proportion of target pictures)

Figure 3.6. Production of allP by experimental and control groups as a function of test (mean proportion of target pictures)

Figure 4.1. Example pre- and post-test pictures

Figure 4.2. Example test prime-target pair

Figure 4.3. Production of stranded prepositions by experimental and control groups as a function of test (proportion of target pictures)

Figure 4.4. Production of null preps by experimental and control groups as a function of test (proportion of target pictures)

Figure 4.5. Correlation of priming strength with production of targets with same and different prepositions

Figure 4.6. Production of stranded prepositions by experimental group as a function of test (proportion of target pictures)

Figure 4.7. Production of null preps by experimental group as a function of test (proportion of target pictures)

Figure 5.1. Example pre- and post-test pictures

Figure 5.2. Example experimental group test prime-target pair

Figure 5.3. Example control group test pair

Figure 5.4. Combined summary of 'Hong Kong' participants' opinions about the purpose of the experiment and what they had learnt by taking part.

Figure 5.5. Production of stranded prepositions by experimental and control groups as a function of test (proportion of target pictures)

Figure 5.6. Production of null prep by experimental and control groups as a function of test (proportion of target pictures)

Figure 6.1. Example of substitution drill picture prompts (taken from Lado & Fries, 1958)

Figure 6.2. Items for a substitution drill



## List of abbreviations used in the thesis

ADJ	adjective
adjP	adjectival passive
allP	all passives
APT	Acquisition by Processing Theory (Truscott & Sharwood-Smith, 2004)
bareP	bare passive
beP	<i>be</i> passive
CALL	computer-assisted language learning
DO	double object (dative construction)
EFL	English as a foreign language
ERP	event-related potential
ESL	English as a second language
GP	the English <i>get</i> passive construction
ICE-GB	the British component of the International Corpus of English
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
IP	Input Processing (VanPatten, 2002, 2007)
L1	first language
L2	second language
MLL	mobile language learning
MOGUL	Modular On-line Growth and Use of Language (Sharwood-Smith & Truscott, 2005)
null prep	L2 English interlanguage structure in which an obligatory stranded preposition is omitted
OVS	object-verb-subject word order
PI	Processing Instruction (VanPatten, 2002)
PO	prepositional object (dative construction)
PT	Processability Theory (Pienemann, 2008)
SLA	second language acquisition
SLI	specific language impairment
TOEIC	an English language test published by the Educational Testing Service
TM	the tough movement construction (e.g., in English: <i>John is easy to please</i> )