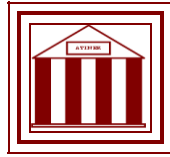# Athens Institute for Education and Research
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LIT2012-0299

Acquisition of Gender in Russian as L3 by Native Speakers of Turkish

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Abstract

According to L2 research, the acquisition of grammatical gender is considered to be one of the most challenging domains for learners of different foreign languages. However, as far as L3 research is concerned, until recently, the acquisition of gender by L3 learners has not been much investigated. The aim of the present study was to find out whether or not the level of proficiency in English as L2 has an impact on the acquisition of the Russian grammatical gender by native speakers of Turkish. The data for this piece of research were collected from two groups of native speakers of Turkish studying Russian for three years. While all the participants had been exposed to equal amount of formal instruction in Russian, their levels of English were significantly different. The first group had low level of English; the second group, in contrast, was determined to have a high level of proficiency in English. The acquisition of the Russian gender by the native speakers of Turkish was examined using a number of tasks: determining the gender of a noun, choosing the correct agreement between a noun and its dependent words and free-writing compositions. The results of the study revealed no significant difference between the two groups on recognition tasks; however, the students of the groups were found to demonstrate significantly different results in their free-writing compositions. Relying on the findings of the study, it was suggested that the sufficient prior knowledge of English as L2 had a positive impact on the Russian gender acquisition and metalinguistic awareness of the L3 learners could be a plausible explanation for the better performance of the second group.

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1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact in the foreign language acquisition research that the prior knowledge of a language has an influence on the acquisition of a sequential foreign language (Odlin, 1989; Kellerman, 1977). Interestingly, most of the research related to the cross-linguistic influence has been conducted in the context of the second language (L2) acquisition regardless of the number of foreign languages a learner knows. However, several recent studies have shown that the L2 acquisition and the third language (L3) acquisition are different processes to a great extent. The main difference emphasized in the literature is that the learner of the L3 has the access to both his/her L1 and L2 knowledge, while the learner of the L2 can rely only on the knowledge of the native language. Therefore, the present study accepts a clear cut difference between L2 and L3 acquisition with the term 'second language' meaning the learner's first foreign language rather than any non-native language currently acquired, while the term the 'third language' refers to the one acquired after L2 (De Angelis, 2007). In this study we aim to examine the effect of the prior knowledge of English as L2 on the acquisition of the grammatical gender in Russian as L3 by Turkish L1 learners and define the following research questions to be answered:

1. Do the native speakers of Turkish with a high level of proficiency in English as L2 perform better while using grammatical gender in Russian as their L3 than those with a low level of proficiency in English?
2. What factors can account for the difference in the performance between the two groups of the learners, if any is available?

The article is structured in the following way. Initially, relying on the recent studies some insight into L3 acquisition will be introduced. Secondly, gender in the Russian language will be described. Further, methodology of the present study will be given. Finally, results, their interpretation and conclusion will be presented.

2. Some insights into the third language acquisition

With the recent development in the L3 acquisition research, there is a hypothesis emerged that the knowledge of the L2 has a positive effect on the acquisition of the L3 and the level of proficiency in the L2 of learners positively correlates with their performance in the L3 (Jedynak, Pytlarz, 2011) Moreover, the acquisition of the L3 is more likely to be influenced by the prior knowledge of L2 rather than that of L1 (Clyne, 1997; Dewaele, 1998; Ringbom, 1987; Williams and Hammarberg, 1998). This influence is manifested, firstly, in the transfer of the L2 structures onto the L3; secondly, in use of their enriched general knowledge about the language, which is commonly known as metalinguistic awareness (Thomas, 1992). Let us now dwell upon both of them.

2.1. Transfer in the L3 acquisition

Transfer is commonly defined as 'the use of native language (or other language) knowledge – in some as yet unclear way – in the acquisition of a second (or

additional) language' (Gass and Selinker, 1983; p. 372). In the L3 acquisition research, there have been numerous studies providing the evidence of transfer from the L2 onto the L3 at different levels: phonological, lexical, syntactical and morphological. At the phonological level, though it is a commonly accepted view that even advanced learners of L3 have L1-based accent, there is some evidence supporting that L2 pronunciation might influence the accent in the L3 (Hammarberg and Hammarberg, 1993; Ringbom, 2001). Another level, where transfer is especially vivid, is lexis. The learners of the L3 were reported to rely on the vocabulary of their L2 especially at the early stages of L3 learning on the condition that L2 and L3 have a number of common cognates. Ringbom's (1987) research on Finnish as the L1 and Swedish as the L1 students with Swedish and Finnish as the L2 respectively, whose L3 was English, provided an experimental proof that learners tended to borrow and transfer lexical units form their L2 (Ringbom, 1987). Regarding the L2-L3 interrelation in the area of morphology, though most researchers are skeptical about the possibility of transfer of either bound or inflectional morphological units and research in this area is scarce, the following studies on gender acquisition in the L3, provide evidence for its transferability. The first study by Jaensch (2011) is related to the acquisition of grammatical gender in German as the L3 by L1 speakers of Spanish and Japanese. The subjects, who were two groups of German as the L3 learners of low intermediate level, completed gender assignment and gender concord tasks. It is important to mention that while Japanese and English (Japanese learners' L1 and L2) does not exhibit gender markings, Spanish native speakers' L1 does. The results indicated that having L1 with grammatical gender does not always account for learners' better performance; also, the learners who have higher proficiency in English performed better in the tasks; finally, while in gender assignment task the Spanish L1 learners relied on their L1, the Japanese L1 learners – on the morphological pattern (Jaensch, 2011). Another study, demonstrating the possibility of transfer of grammatical gender from the L2 to the L3 is the one conducted by Jedynak and Pytlarz (2011). Relying on the performance of the learners of English with Polish as the L1 and German as the L2, the researchers argued that gender can be transferred both from L1 and L2; further, the scholars pointed out that the transfer from the L2 would be expected to correlate positively with the participants' proficiency in language (Jedynak, Pytlarz, 2011).

Along with providing evidence in favour of transfer, the research into the L3 acquisition (Williams and Hammarberg, 1998, Ringbom, 1987, De Angelis, 2007) also explored the factors that may enhance the transfer from L2 structures on the L3. These factors were determined as: language distance, target and source language proficiency, recency of use, exposure to a non-native language environment, order of acquisition and formality of context. Now, let us discuss the ones relevant for this study, namely, language typological similarity and level of proficiency. The distance of the languages or typological similarity (Hammarberg, 2001) is the primary condition for the L2 influence on the L3. It is considered that the closer the L2 to the L3 is typologically, the higher possibility there is for transfer from the L2 to the L3, especially if L1 is more distant from the L3 than the L2 (Bouvy, 2000; Dewaele, 1998). For example, L3 learners of Dutch with prior knowledge of German as the L2 are more likely to transfer structures from their L2 than the L3 learners of Dutch who have learnt English as the L2 (Kellerman, 1977).

Further, the proficiency in the target and source languages is reported to be another major factor accounting for transfer. There have been some studies in TLA (De Angelis, 2011) demonstrating that level of proficiency in the L2 correlates positively with the success in the L3 acquisition and with transfer of language structures from the

L2 onto L3, especially at early stages. Thus, De Angelis (2011) provided a piece of evidence in favor of positive correlation between proficiency in the L2 and performance on the L3 writing tasks. In this study the proficiency of Italian L1 students in German as the L2 was assessed by a native speaker of German. After that, the students were divided into 4 groups according to their proficiency in the L2 and were asked to fulfill a writing task. A considerable difference was recorded in the English (L3) written production between the groups with low level and high level of German as the L2. Relying on the results of the participants, De Angelis (2011) concluded that even one-two year non-native language instruction is enough for the significant difference in students' production (De Angelis, 2011).

2.2. *Metalinguistic awareness*

In the course of L3 acquisition, learners, besides acquiring knowledge of a foreign language, also obtain an ability which allows them 'to think of language and of perceiving language, including the ability to separate meanings and forms, discriminate language components, identify ambiguity and understand the use of grammatical forms and structures' known as metalinguistic awareness (De Angelis, 2007, p.121). So, the more languages a learner has mastered, the broader and more advantageous his/her capacity is for mastering further ones. Surprisingly enough, studies published before 1960s support an opposite point of view, stating that bilingualism is one of the primary causes of retardation (Goodenough, 1926). Nowadays these points of view seem ridiculously erroneous due to the variety of works experimentally proving the advantageous effect of bi- and multilingualism. To give an example, Klein (1995) conducted a study on the prepositional verbs and the preposition standing with two groups of learners. The first group consisted of the learners of English as the L2, while the second group comprised multilinguals with different language backgrounds with English as the L3. The subjects were asked to fill the prepositions into 18 sentences and the results confirmed the hypothesis that multilinguals, regardless of their L1 and L2, were more successful in the acquisition of verb prepositional standing. Fouser (2001) also demonstrated that even at the early stages, English L1 learners of Korean as L3 were not only relying on their previous knowledge of syntax and morphology in Japanese, but also had a deep understanding of their learning process in Korean. This study, along with several others (Eviatar & Ibrahim, 2000; Galambos & Goldin-Meadow, 1990), provided clear evidence of metalinguistic awareness being one of the vital factors that assist multilingual in learning additional languages.

3.   **Russian gender**

The Russian gender system is of the semantic-formal nature, which means that the semantic-related gender, masculine and feminine, reflects natural gender distinction in animate nouns; while the form-related gender, masculine, feminine or neutral, can be predicted from declension type (Ceytlin, 2005; Comrie, 1987; Corbett, 1982; 1991; Timberlake, 1993). Thus, in Russian, the form-related gender, which is the focus of the study, and declension type are largely isomorphic – the members of a given declension as a rule condition the same agreement and belong to the same gender. Russian nouns of declension type 1 are masculine, nouns of declension types 2 and 3

are feminine and others are neutral (Comrie, 1987; Corbett, 1982, 1991). In the Russian language, there are so called canonical nouns, which declension type and gender can be easily defined relying on their phonological form. They are: feminine, declension type 2 ending in the vowel –a and masculine, declension type 1 ending in a non-palatalized consonant (see Example 1 and Example 2).

Example 1:
Шапк-а (fem.) – [hat];
Дорог-а (fem.) – [road].

Example 2:
Стол (masc.) – [table];
Город (masc.) – [city].

Nouns ending in a palatalized consonant can be either feminine of declension type 3 or masculine of declension type 1; therefore, gender of such nouns cannot be determined relying on their phonological form (see Example 3).

Example 3:
Де-нь (masc.) - [day];
Ко-нь (masc.) - [horse];
Но-чь (fem.) - [night];
Ре-чь (fem.) -[speech].

Neutral Russian nouns can also cause difficulties for leaners because having a vowel –o as the ending, in the unstressed position they may sound like canonical feminine nouns with ending –a.

The Russian gender is manifested in the agreements of nouns and with their dependent words such as adjectives, participles, demonstratives, possessive pronouns, past tense verbs, and some numerals, as well as in the substitution of the nouns with corresponding personal pronouns (see Table 1).

Table 1: Gender agreement in the Russian language

		Masculine	*Feminine*	*Neutral*
Adjective	*Big*	*Больш-ой*	*Больш-ая*	*Больш-ое*
Participle	*Thinking*	*Думающ-ий*	*Думающ-ая*	*Думающ-ее*
Demonstrative	*This*	*Этот*	*Эта*	*Это*
Possessive pronoun	*My*	*Мой*	*Моя*	*Мое*
Past tense verb	*Made*	*Сделал-*	*Сделал-а*	*Сделал-о*
Numeral	*First*	*Перв-ый*	*Перв-ая*	*Перв-ое*
Personal pronoun	*It*	*Он*	*Она*	*Оно*

Finally, it is necessary to clarify that nouns of different genders and their dependent words belong to different declension classes in the Russian six-case system, that is, for example, the endings of a masculine noun and its dependent words in the instrumental or genitive case in Russian will differ from those of a feminine noun and its dependent words in the same cases.

3. The present study
3.1. Participants

The participants were two groups of randomly chosen students from Turkish universities who had been studying Russian as an elective course. To get more

detailed information related to the informants, their language background and level of proficiency in foreign languages, they were asked to fill in the background questionnaire. The analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaire showed that Turkish was their L1, which they used in their daily interaction. All the students were on the third year, corresponding to Level 1 (Antonova, Nahabina, Safronova, Tolstih, 2003) of learning Russian, which they had had twice a week (total 4 hours) and had finished elementary and basic levels of it. Different instructors had been teaching them during three years. Before starting the Russian language, the students had also been exposed to formal English instructions. However, relying on the students' reports related to their four language skills in English (reading, writing, listening and speaking), the level of their proficiency in the English language varied greatly from low to high (Educational Testing Service, 2007a). To validate the participants' self-reports on their proficiency in English, they were asked to do reading and listening sections of TOEFL sample test. Relying on the results of the TOEFL sample test, two groups were identified as the participants of the study.

3.1.1. Group1

Group1 consisted of 25 students (aged 19-22). They had been exposed to formal instructions in English at school; however, they had never taken any proficiency exam in the language. The participants defined their level of English as low (Educational Testing Service, 2007a) and they scored between 0-14 in every section of the TOEFL sample test, which corresponds to the low level (Educational Testing Service, 2007a). To exclude the possibility that this group of learners might be simply 'unsuccessful' students in all the subjects they had learned the Grade Point Average (GPA) at university was requested and further compared with the GPA of the second group. The difference between the GPA scores of the two groups was insignificant.

3.1.2. Group2

Group2 also consisted of 25 students (aged 19-22). They had had English classes at school and most of them were the students of Turkish universities where English is the medium of instruction. The students identified their level of English as high (Educational Testing Service, 2007a). Their scores on the implemented TOEFL sample test confirmed their level of proficiency in English.

3.2. Materials
A questionnaire, one recognition and two production tasks were implemented in this study.

3.2.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire included fifteen questions eliciting information related to participants' age, gender, years of learning English and Russian languages, and their level of proficiency in English. The questions regarding proficiency in English were developed relying on the description of reading, listening, writing and speaking skills determined for low, intermediate and high levels of proficiency in English (Educational Testing Service, 2007b).

3.2.2. Tasks
3.2.2.1. The definition of knowledge of the form-related gender in Russian

The knowledge of the form-related gender in Russian implies the ability to determine the correct gender of Russian inanimate nouns and to use the correct gender agreements of the nouns with their dependent words in the recognition and production activities.

3.2.2.2. Description of the tasks

To examine the participants' knowledge of the form-related gender in the Russian language three tasks were implemented. In the first task, the students had to determine the gender of the 30 suggested Russian nouns. The second task included 25 item completion sentences in which the participants had to determine the correct gender of a noun and to use the correct gender agreements between the noun and its dependent words. Finally, the students were asked to write a composition on one of the suggested topics.

3.3. Procedure

The tasks were given to the participants during their Russian classes on three different days. The learners were not instructed to revise the topic before, which allowed us to measure their "permanent knowledge" on the topic.

4. Results and interpretation
4.1. Task1

The results of task1 revealed that, on the whole, both groups did well when they had to determine the gender of a Russian noun (Mean for Group1 is 87, 35; Mean for Group2 is 88, 40 as it is evident from Table 2).

Table 2: Descriptive analysis of the groups' performance on Task1

Group No	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Err. Mean
Group1	25	87, 35	5, 256	2, 218
Group2	25	88, 40	4, 627	2, 338

The data analysis showed that all the students had mastered the canonical rule of the form-related Russian gender assignment (see section 2). They also made very few mistakes when dealing with neutral nouns. The only difficulty that the participants encountered with was the cases when a noun ended in a palatalized consonant. As it was discussed in section 2, the gender in such nouns cannot be figured out relying on the phonological form of the noun. The data analysis revealed a common tendency among all the participants: the students tended to overuse masculine gender for nouns ending in a palatalized consonant. Further, in order to compare the performance of

Group1 with that of Group2, T-test was implemented and the difference in the performances occurred to be insignificant.

4.2. Task2

The IC task offered to the participants implied not only the ability to determine the gender of a noun but also the use of the correct agreement of the noun with dependent words, such as adjectives, adjective pronouns, past tense verbs and numerals in the nominative and oblique cases. The quantitative analysis revealed that both groups showed above 80% correct performance on the task (Mean for Group1= 81, 24; Mean for Group2 = 83, 14).

Table 3: Descriptive analysis of the groups' performance on Task2

Group No	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Err. Mean
Group1	25	81, 24	7, 216	2, 312
Group2	25	83, 14	6, 625	2, 330

Further, the Independent Sample Test was applied and the difference in the performance between the two groups occurred to be insignificant as well. The qualitative analysis of the students' data obtained from Task2 showed that all the mistakes in the gender agreements occurred in the oblique cases. Example 4 is a typical kind of the incorrect gender use found in the students' production. Here, a student used the correct ending of the feminine noun in the instrumental case but made a mistake in the agreement by using the ending of masculine gender in the instrumental case in the dependent adjective.

Example 4:

Вы	*должны*	*писать*	**синим (adj., *masc.,instrum.)*	*ручкой (noun, fem., instrum.)*
You	*must*	*write*	**blue (adj., *masc.,instrum.)*	*pen (noun, fem., instrum.)*

Correct:

Вы	*должны*	*писать*	*синей fem.,instrum.)*	*(adj., ручкой (noun, fem., instrum.)*
You	*must*	*write*	*blue fem.,instrum.)*	*(adj., pen (noun, fem., instrum.)*

You must write with the blue pen.

It seems to be very natural that all the available mistakes found in the task were made by the participants when using gender agreements in the oblique cases because the use of gender in oblique cases requires not only the ability to determine the gender of a noun and use the correct agreement of it with dependent words but also the knowledge of the case declension of the noun and its dependent words. It is worth mentioning that the Russian case system, consisting of six cases and having different declension types for masculine, feminine and neutral nouns (see section 2), is quite complex and was reported as a problematic for L2 and bilingual learners of Russian (Ceytlin, 2009; Minkov, 2011). Thus, relying on the error analysis of the participants' results on Task2 and considering the discussion above, it can be suggested that some of the mistakes in the gender agreements between a noun and its dependent words made by the students' in the Russian oblique cases may be triggered by another intra linguistic factor, namely, cases in the Russian language. Moreover, the data of some participants' performance on Task2 showed that there are items where a student used

the correct gender agreement between a noun and its dependant words but the dependent word is used in an incorrect case. For instance, in the item presented in Example 5 below, a student determined the gender of the canonical feminine noun correctly and used the feminine gender agreement between the noun and its dependent adjective but instead of the prepositional case used them in the accusative one. This observation can be considered as the confirmation of the presupposition that the students have some difficulties with case declensions and some of the mistakes found in the gender agreements in oblique cases might be triggered by the complexity of the Russian declension system.

Example 5:

Саша	купил	новую	машину	на	*прошлую (adj., fem., *accus.)	*неделю (noun, fem., *accus.)
Sasha	bought	new	car	on	*last (adj., fem., *accus.)	*week (noun.,fem., *accus.)

Correct:

Саша	купил	новую	машину	на	прошлой (adj., fem., prepos.)	неделе(noun, fem., prepos.)
Sasha	bought	new	car	on	last adj., fem., *accus.)	week(noun, fem., prepos.)

Sasha bought a new car last week.

However, due to the fact that Russian has a fusional inflectional morphology (Comrie, 1987), it seems to be not possible to figure out to what extent the incorrect use of gender agreements is influenced by other intra linguistic factors. To sum up the participants' performance on Task2, on the whole, the students of both groups demonstrated a good performance related to the use of the correct gender agreements between masculine, feminine and neutral nouns and their dependant words; and no significant difference between Group1 and Group2 was revealed in this task.

4.3. Task 3

Finally, the participants were asked to write a composition on one of the suggested topics. Table 4 displays the descriptive analysis of Group1 and Group2' performances related to gender use in their compositions.

Table 4: Descriptive analysis of the groups' performance on Task 3

Group No	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Err. Mean
Group1	25	18, 03	14, 346	2, 268
Group2	25	34, 80	12, 627	3, 578

As it is evident from Table 4, the performance of both groups on the composition task occurred to be much more erroneous than their performance on the two previous tasks. The mean of the correct gender use in Group1 appeared to be only 18, 03 and in Group2, the mean is equal to 34, 80, while in the two previous tasks, the means for both groups were more that 80. Most probably, the writing task itself can be regarded as responsible for the increasing number of the incorrect gender uses in the students' production because along with the mastery of grammatical devices, writing requires activation of other skills such as general language use, ability to develop thoughts on a topic, the ability to manipulate sentences and phrases and mechanical skills (Heaton, 1975, p.135). To put it in different words, while in the first two tasks, when the

students had one difficulty to cope with, namely gender assignment, they had a chance to focus on the gender use and demonstrated a high level of knowledge of the gender assignment rules in the Russian language; in the composition task, on the other hand, which required activation of all other grammatical knowledge as well as vocabulary and judgemental elements, the students occurred to be not very successful in applying known gender rules into practice. The numerous mistakes in the gender use made by the participants in their compositions may imply that, though the students demonstrated a good level of knowledge of the Russian gender assignment, they lacked mechanical skills necessary for the correct use of the grammatical category to the written language. Another interesting observation, validated with the help of the T-test (see Table 5), was that the students in Group2, who had a high level of proficiency in English, scored significantly better than those in Group1 with low level of proficiency in English.

Table 5. T-Test for Equality of Means of the Groups' performance on the Task 3

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-Test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	12,689	,001	-3,960	78	,000	-16,775	4,236	-25,208	-8,342
Equal variances not assumed			-3,960	65,995	,000	-16,775	4,236	-25,233	-8,317

As it was discussed in Section 1, several studies reported that knowledge of the L2 has a beneficial influence on leaning of the L3 and students with higher level of proficiency in the L2 perform better on tasks in the L3. In this respect, the findings of this study are consistent with them as the participants with high proficiency in English as the L2 performed significantly better related to the correct gender use while writing compositions. Further, according to several scholars, the L2 is more likely to enhance acquisition of the L3 if it is typologically closer to the latter as in this case the participants with prior knowledge of a foreign language would rely on their L2 and transfer certain features of it onto their L3. However, the better performance of Group2 cannot be attributed to the positive transfer, as the category of the form-related gender is available neither in Turkish, their L1, nor in English, their L2. Consequently, transfer as a factor responsible for the better performance of Group2 on the composition task should be excluded. The other factor that is known to enhance the acquisition of L3 is metalinguistic awareness. As it was described in section 1, multilingual learners were found to have superiority in the acquisition of a foreign language in comparison with L2 learners thanks to their sensitivity to language, the ability to analyse forms, meanings and rules of a language. However, relying on the performance of our groups, it would be incorrect to state that Group2 had mastered the rule of the form-related gender assignment in the Russian language better that Group1,

as their scores on Task1 and Task2 were rather high and insignificantly different. Therefore, the better performance of Group2 related to the gender use in the composition task is more likely to be attributed to a higher ability to activate such skills as general language use, ability to develop thoughts on a topic, to manipulate sentences and phrases as well as mechanical skills a writing task requires. To put it shortly, metalinguistic awareness can be suggested to contribute to the students' 'problem solving ability' (Bialystok and Ryan, 1985) in the writing task.

Conclusion
The findings of the present study, investigating the effect of prior knowledge of English as L2 on the acquisition of the gender in Russian as the L3, support the hypothesis that the origin of the enhanced abilities and skills found in L3 learners, is in their developed metalinguistic awareness.

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