



Pro-drop parameter and its Interferences in English learning: A case study in Iranian contexts

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ABSTRACT

The present study focused on Chomsky's pro-drop parameter theory (1981). Based on Chomsky's theory, there is a pro-drop parameter which is "true" in Farsi and "false" in English. Such parameters describe all languages world-wide. Knowledge of these parameters can help people understand other languages. To achieve the objectives of this study, first, pro-drop parameter was introduced and its characteristics were discussed. Having presented some examples the researchers compared English and Farsi languages. Findings revealed that some errors committed by Iranian English language learners can be due to this parameter.

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Introduction

Since Universal Grammar (UG) which is stored somewhere within the speakers' brain, contains a set of absolute Universals, notions and Principles which do not vary from one language to the next, languages, then they differ from each other in some Parameters like head parameters and their analyses can be beneficial for applied linguistics. (Haegeman, 2008; Chomsky, 2005; Cook & Newson, 2007).

English and Farsi are different with in Chomsky's Principles and Parameters (P & P) theory (Chomsky 1981a, 1981b, 1986a, 1986b). The investigation of parameters has attracted particular attention, manifesting the nature of UG-based differences between languages (Vaez Dalili, 2009).

In fact, it has two 'settings' or 'values' allowing for a binary cross-linguistic variation. While some languages allow subjects to be phonetically hidden others necessitate them to be overtly observable in the sentence. The former are known as pro-drop languages with [+ pro-drop] setting like Persian and the latter are called non-pro-drop languages with [-pro-drop] setting like English (Vaez Dalili, 2009).

According to Chomsky (1988), the pro-drop (or null subject) parameter "determines whether the subject of a clause can be suppressed" (p.64).

According to Soheili Esfahani (2005) Farsi is a pro-drop language in which pronouns drop in subject position since it has a relatively rich agreement system. Based on the pro-drop parameter languages are different with respect to whether they allow the deletion of pronouns such as *I, you, he, etc.* in subject position and non-pro-drop languages require lexical subjects. (Soheili Esfahani, 2005).

Example 1:

Pro-drop	Non-pro-drop
Farsi	English
bazi mikonam	I play.

As the above example shows Farsi does not require its speaker to use the pronoun *I*, and the speaker is allowed to delete it. Also Farsi speaker can say "man bazi mikonam." Nevertheless the present study seeks to compare the similarities and differences between Persian and English based on Chomsky's Principles and Parameters.

Rahmani and Alizadeh (2012) in an article entitled "An Investigation into Some Similarities and Differences of Persian and English Head Parameters Based on X-bar Syntax" concluded that English is head-initial in its all lexical phrases of Noun Phrases, Verb Phrases, PPs and Adj Phrases and on the other hand Persian is mostly a head-final language because its NPs are considered as head-initial (like English NPs) due to the fact that more complements follow their head nouns than those which precede, hence it is considered head-initial in its NPs; in other words, more NPs are ordered on the basis of the phrase structure rule of $X' \rightarrow X$ complement than that of $X' \rightarrow$ Complement X.

Statement of the problem

Languages can be compared based on the pro-drop parameter. Several studies already have investigated this UG parameter. English and Farsi are two languages which differ based on this parameter. Given that the research to date mainly focused upon the comparison of two languages on the basis of pro-drop parameter, the present study was done to investigate its role in Iranian contexts where English is taught as a foreign language.

Review of Literature

The pro-drop parameter is a parameter, which specifies that languages are different in terms of whether they allow the deletion of pronouns such as *I, you, he, etc.* in subject position (Soheili Esfahani, 2005). Pahlavannezhad and Akhlaghi (2013) articulate the characteristics of a pro-drop language. They argue that the first characteristic of a pro-drop language is that overt subjects are optional in many cases. Moreover, this parameter implies a subject-verb inversion characteristic in pro-drop languages. For instance in Farsi both ([?ali be madrese raft]: Ali to school went) and ([be madrese raft ?ali]: to school went Ali), are acceptable sentences (Pahlavannezhad & Akhlaghi, 2013). Another characteristic of the pro-drop parameter is the existence of expletives (Pahlavannezhad & Akhlaghi, 2013). English, which is not a pro-drop language, requires the expletive 'it' and 'there' because the subject position in a sentence cannot be left empty, e.g., "It rains" in English and ([mibârad]) in Farsi. That trace effect is final characteristic involved in pro-drop parameter. In languages which do not allow pro-drop, the

complementizer 'that' may not be left in the sentence after wh-movement has occurred. Because of this the sentence "whom did you say that is coming?" is not grammatical, whereas a similar sentence in Farsi ([če kasi rā gofti ke miāyad?]) is grammatical (Pahlavannezhad & Akhlaghi, 2013).

White (1985, 1986, as cited in Soheili Esfahani, 2005) explored whether Spanish learners of English transfer the L1 value of the pro-drop parameter to the L2 they are learning. It was found that Spanish learners display inharmonious patterns of acquiring second language and accept sentences with an implicit subject are more likely than the French learners of the control group in this study. This indicates that the value of Spanish has been transferred to English.

When the first language is English and the second language is Persian, or one of the other pro-drop languages, the student's interlanguage cannot provide a clear picture of the adoption of the inappropriate parameter value (Soheili Esfahani, 2005). The problem lies in the fact that pro-drop languages, as mentioned above, employ both null and lexical pronouns. Further empirical evidence supporting the above assumption is due to the overuse of the first singular pronoun *man* 'I' by a student who is learning Persian at an intermediate level.

There are good reasons to believe that learners of a pro-drop language employ overt pronouns free of discourse constraints on their identification in a discourse model. As a result, where pragmatic knowledge is not sufficient to enable learners to employ null subjects pronouns they resort to their syntactic competence (Soheili Esfahani, 2005).

Galasso (2002) investigated transferring the 'pro-drop' parameter from Spanish to English. According to Galasso, the notion of L2 interference appears to correlate with other studies clearly indicating that the nature of L2 errors are not just random errors due to a lot of possible L1-to-L2 mismatch constructs made available by UG; but rather, such errors tend to be strategically derived by the speaker's native L1 language parameter settings.

Lai (2006) explored the effects of English proficiency on the acquisition of English [-pro-drop] parameter and to explore the effects of explicit instruction of [±pro-drop] features. It was found that most participants, in spite of different English achievements, took a lot of benefits from instruction of pro-drop parameter. As a result, it is suggested that English teachers should incorporate explicit instruction of the [±pro-drop] features to increase their students' awareness of the [±pro-drop] features and to familiarize learners with various syntactic patterns in different languages (Lai, 2006).

Following instruction of pro-drop parameter, all the students not merely scored higher in both the translation task and the grammaticality judgment task, but also made better use of proper English syntax in order to figure out English sentences. Learners in the More Proficient Group, compared with those in the Less Proficient Group, made great advances in both the two production tasks and the think-aloud protocol. Most of the participants showed their appreciation of IPP and considered the activities of pro-drop helpful in setting the [±pro-drop] parameters in two different languages, English and Chinese. These findings also shed bright light on the EFL pedagogy. The current research clearly manifested that most senior high school students, in spite of different English achievements, benefited a lot from IPP. It is thus suggested that English teachers should incorporate explicit instruction of the [±pro-drop] features to raise learners' awareness of the [±pro-drop] features and to

familiarize learners with different syntactic patterns in different languages.

Gönen (2010) investigated whether native speakers of Turkish, a [+ pro-drop] language, reset their L1 pro-drop parameter value when they learn a [- pro-drop] language such as English and whether these learners have access to UG in the initial, intermediary and advanced levels of their interlanguage development. The findings of Gönen's study indicated how parameter setting occurs not only in the initial state but also in the later stages of interlanguage development. It has been assumed that learners' L1 plays a key role in resetting the parameters of L1 into L2. Although the pro-drop parameter comes within a variety of properties, all of them may not be acquired concurrently (Wakabayashi, 2002, as cited in Gönen, 2010). Learners may not have reset the pro-drop values of their L1 for all properties of the parameter (Gönen, 2010).

Discussion

The term 'interlanguage' refers to the interim grammars by second-language learners on their way to the target language (McLaughlin, 1986). Therefore, Iranian EFL learners experience interlanguage while acquiring English. Several errors produced by Iranian EFL learners are interlingual. Interlingual errors are those resulting from language transfer, i.e., caused by the learner's native language (Soheili Esfahani, 2005) and are related to the mother tongue (Gass & Selinker, 2001). The examples below show the interference of pro-drop parameter in foreign language learning.

Example 1:

F: Qaza mixor-am.

E: I am eating food.

According to Example 1, the bound pronoun (-am) in Farsi implies *man* which means I. Due to lack of this kind of pronoun in English, it is not possible to omit the pronoun I; however, the omission of *man* in Farsi equivalent is feasible.

Example 2:

Farsi: ali be madrese raft.

English: Ali went to school.

If the subject of a Farsi sentence is third person and singular and acts in the simple past tense (Example 2), then the bound pronoun does not exist. Anyway, here it is not possible to omit the subject "ali", since the aim of the speaker may be misunderstood by the hearer. The existence of the subject (independent pronoun or the noun) is necessary in such cases.

Example 3

Farsi: baran mibarad.

English: It is raining.

The subject in Farsi sentence is *baran*, and it needs to be mentioned by the speaker, since the verb *mibarad*, is used for everything falling from the sky such as snow, rain, ice crystals and etc. English speakers use "it" to convey the meaning. The above example (3) indicates the existence of expletives in non-pro-drop languages (Pahlavannezhad & Akhlaghi, 2013) which is a characteristic of pro-drop parameter.

Example 4:

Farsi: inja hastam.

English: Here I am.

English grammar requires the speaker to use I, but in the Farsi equivalent, the pronoun *man* can be deleted.

Example 5:

i) Farsi: saat 9 ?ast.

ii) English: It's nine.

To express time, Farsi speakers, usually say " saat 9 ?ast". The omission of the subject, *saat*, results in an incorrect expression.

However, according to the existence of expletives in non-pro-drop languages (Pahlavannezhad & Akhlaghi, 2013), English speakers usually use "it" to express time.

Pro-drop parameter can interfere in the process of learning a foreign language. Primary EFL learners are more expected to produce interlingual errors due to this parameter. For instance, most of primary EFL learners in Iranian contexts commit such errors while translating L2 sentences to Farsi. They usually translate the sentences word by word. They say, for example, /an ?ast saat 9/. /u (e.g. an dokhtar&pesar) dar koja aya zendegi mikonad?/. These errors are likely committed by EFL Learners due to pro-drop parameter.

Conclusion

The major purpose of the present study was to investigate the pro-drop parameter and its effect on foreign language learning. Two features of pro-drop parameter (Pahlavannezhad & Akhlaghi, 2013) were discussed: first, overt subjects are optional in many cases in a pro-drop language; second, expletives exist in non-pro-drop languages. These characteristics need to be taken into EFL practitioners' account. These two characteristics can be major sources of some interlingual errors committed by EFL students in Iranian contexts. While teaching, EFL teachers need to have a close look to pro-drop parameter and provide their students with required materials at their first stages of learning English.

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