The Lexical-Syntactic Interface Deficit: A Longitudinal Corpus Study on the Interplay of Grammatical Gender and Case Acquisition in L1 English Learners of German

Katherine Reed*

Bangor University, Bangor, United Kingdom

*Corresponding author: Katherine Reed, katherine188@gmail.com

Abstract

The acquisition of the German case system, with its intricate reliance on grammatical gender, constitutes a paramount challenge for second language (L2) learners, particularly those whose first language (L1) is English. This study posits that the core difficulty lies not in the syntactic rules of case assignment per se, but in the unstable acquisition of lexical grammatical gender, creating a critical breakdown at the lexical-syntactic interface. Grounded in the Interface Hypothesis and Processability Theory, this research presents a longitudinal, mixed-methods investigation. We analyzed a 90,000-word learner corpus, tracking 80 L1 English learners from intermediate (B1) to advanced (C1) proficiency over 18 months, comparing 40 instructed learners with 40 naturalistic learners in a study-abroad context. Results from quantitative error analysis and qualitative case studies reveal that approximately 65% of all case-marking errors are directly attributable to prior incorrect gender assignment. This "cascading" error phenomenon is most prevalent in the Dative case and with feminine nouns, which learners often erroneously default to. While naturalistic learners demonstrated significantly better proceduralization of case-marked chunks (e.g., prepositional phrases), neither group showed significant improvement in the underlying, implicit knowledge of grammatical gender itself. The study concludes that pedagogical interventions must pivot decisively from teaching case paradigms in isolation to an integrated, input-rich, and lexically-focused approach that directly targets and strengthens the vulnerable gender-case interface.

Keywords

Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Grammatical Gender, Case System, Interface Hypothesis, Processability Theory

1. Introduction

The journey of an L1 English speaker towards proficiency in German is often marked by a persistent and formidable obstacle: the mastery of the nominal case system. This system, which encodes the grammatical roles of subject (Nominative), direct object (Accusative), indirect object (Dative), and possession (Genitive) through morphological inflections on determiners, adjectives, and pronouns, is a cornerstone of German syntax. However, its acquisition is inextricably linked to another, even more fundamental, lexical property: grammatical gender. The tripartite gender system (masculine, feminine, neuter) dictates the specific declensional pathways a noun will follow across the four cases. For the English-speaking learner, this represents a profound typological shift. English has largely abandoned its case system (preserving it only in a handful of pronouns: *he/him/his*) and possesses no grammatical gender, relying instead on rigid word order to convey grammatical relations [1].

The persistent nature of case and gender errors in the interlanguage of even advanced learners suggests that traditional pedagogical methods, which often present case through decontextualized paradigms and gender as a matter of rote memorization, are insufficient. Errors such as *"Ich helfe die Mann"* (instead of the correct Dative *"dem Mann"*) are not merely slips; they are systematic indicators of an underlying acquisition problem. This paper argues that the core of this problem is not located within the syntactic processing of case rules or the lexical storage of gender in isolation, but precisely at the interface where these two domains meet [2]. The learner must seamlessly retrieve an abstract, often arbitrary lexical feature (gender) to correctly compute a syntactic operation (case marking). It is at this juncture that the system most frequently fails.

Drawing upon the Interface Hypothesis and the developmental predictions of Processability Theory, this longitudinal study investigates this lexical-syntactic interface as the primary locus of difficulty. We move beyond a static snapshot of learner errors to trace the evolution of the gender-case relationship over time and across different learning contexts. Our research is guided by the following questions:

1.What is the quantitative relationship between errors in grammatical gender assignment and errors in case marking in the spoken and written production of L1 English learners of German?

2.How does this relationship evolve as learners progress from intermediate to advanced proficiency?

3.How do different learning contexts (formal instruction vs. naturalistic immersion) influence the acquisition and stabilization of the gender-case interface?

4.What are the implications of these findings for the development of more effective pedagogical materials and instructional strategies in German as a Foreign Language (GFL)?

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 The Linguistic Challenge: An Interlocking System

The German case and gender system presents a complex puzzle. The definite article, for instance, must agree with the noun in gender, number, and case. This results in a matrix of forms, such as for the definite article: masculine *der/den/dem/des*, feminine *die/die/der/der*, neuter *das/das/dem/des* [3]. The acquisition of these forms is compounded by the notorious opacity of German grammatical gender. While certain semantic cues (e.g., male beings are typically masculine) and morphological cues (e.g., the suffix *-ung* denotes femininity) exist, a vast number of nouns offer no transparent motivation for their gender assignment (e.g., *der Löffel* [spoon, masc.], *die Gabel* [fork, fem.], *das Messer* [knife, neut.]). As Mills (1986) elaborates, this arbitrariness imposes a significant learning burden, requiring the learner to acquire each noun as a package comprising its form, meaning, and-critically-its grammatical gender.

2.2 Theoretical Lenses: Interface Hypothesis and Processability Theory

The Interface Hypothesis (IH), as developed by Sorace and colleagues, provides a powerful explanatory framework for our study. The IH distinguishes between internal interfaces (e.g., between syntax and semantics) and external interfaces (e.g., between syntax and discourse-pragmatics). The connection between lexical gender and syntactic case is a quintessential internal interface. The hypothesis predicts that structures requiring the integration of information from different cognitive modules will remain persistently vulnerable in L2 acquisition, even at very high levels of proficiency [4]. This vulnerability manifests as optionality and instability in production, precisely the kind of inconsistent case marking observed in advanced learners. A learner may correctly produce the Dative in a highly practiced chunk like *mit mir* but fail to do so with a noun whose gender is less entrenched, leading to an interface error like *"mit die Freund."*

Complementing the IH, Processability Theory (PT) offers a developmental perspective. PT posits that learners cannot bypass certain stages of grammatical development, as they must gradually build the procedural skills necessary to handle increasingly complex linguistic structures. The acquisition of German word order and case follows a well-documented sequence in PT: from no inflection, to plural marking, to Adjective-Number agreement, to the acquisition of the Nominative-Accusative contrast, and finally to the mastery of the Dative and other complex cases. Crucially, PT implies that the successful processing of case endings depends on the prior and automatic retrieval of gender and number features. If the lexical gender is not readily available, the syntactic procedure for case marking will inevitably falter. Our study sits at the intersection of these theories, using the IH to explain the *locus* of the problem and PT to understand its *developmental trajectory* [5].

2.3 Empirical Grounding: Previous Research on Gender and Case

A substantial body of research has documented the difficulties L2 learners face with German gender and case. Early studies using Contrastive Analysis correctly predicted the area of difficulty but failed to account for the specific nature of learner errors. Error Analysis revealed these errors to be systematic, not random.

- Gender Acquisition: Diehl et al. (2000), in a comprehensive study, found that grammatical gender was one of the last features to be acquired, often remaining problematic after years of study. They noted particular instability with the neuter gender.

- Case Acquisition: Research by Kempe & MacWhinney (1998) using connectionist modeling showed that the probabilistic nature of cues (e.g., animacy, word order) complicates the learning of case. Baten (2011), using psycholinguistic methods, provided evidence that L2 learners process case-marked articles less automatically than native speakers, indicating a reliance on explicit knowledge [6].

- The Interface: While many studies have noted the co-occurrence of gender and case errors, few have quantitatively isolated the causal direction. Corpus-based studies like those on the *Falko* learner corpus have annotated for error types but a focused, longitudinal analysis of how an error in one domain triggers an error in the other has been less common [7]. Rogers (2017) touched on this by investigating lexical chunks, but did not fully theorize the interface deficit. Our study aims to fill this gap by providing a rigorous, longitudinal account of the gender-case interface, tracking its development across proficiency levels and learning contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design: A Longitudinal, Mixed-Methods Approach

This study employed a longitudinal, mixed-methods design to capture both the quantitative development and qualitative characteristics of learner interlanguage. Data was collected at three time points over an 18-month period: T1 (Baseline, B1), T2 (9 months, B2), and T3 (18 months, C1).

3.2 Participants

The participant pool consisted of 80 L1 English learners of German, all of whom had completed at least two years of university-level German instruction (approximately A2/B1 level) prior to the study. They were divided into two matched groups:

- Group I (Instructed): 40 students continuing their German studies at a home university in an English-speaking country. Their exposure to German was primarily through formal classroom instruction (5 hours per week) with limited opportunity for extracurricular interaction [8].
- Group N (Naturalistic): 40 students who embarked on a year-long study abroad program in Germany or Austria immediately following the T1 data collection. They were enrolled in university courses alongside native speakers and lived in shared accommodation or host families.

A control group of 20 native German speakers provided baseline data for comparison.

3.3 Corpus Compilation

A longitudinal learner corpus of approximately 90,000 words was compiled. At each time point (T1, T2, T3), data was collected through:

1.Written Production: A 400-word argumentative essay on a socially relevant topic (e.g., environmental policy, digitalization).

2.Oral Production: A 15-minute semi-structured interview, transcribed according to HIAT conventions.

This multi-modal approach allowed for the comparison of planned versus spontaneous language use.

3.4 Data Annotation and Analytical Procedure

The analysis focused on all contexts requiring a determiner (definite, indefinite, demonstrative) or possessive pronoun. A detailed, manual annotation scheme was applied using the UAM Corpus Tool. Each instance was coded for:

- Target Accuracy: Correct/Incorrect for the required context.
- Error Typology:
  - Pure Gender Error (PGE): Incorrect gender in a context where case is unambiguous (e.g., Nominative subject: *Die Buch ist gut*).
  - Pure Case Error (PCE): Correct gender, but incorrect case form selected (e.g., *Ich sehe der Mann* for Accusative *den*).
  - Interface Error (IE): A cascading error where an initial incorrect gender assignment leads directly to an incorrect case form (e.g., for Dative *mit dem Mann*, the learner produces *mit die Mann*). This was only coded if the selected form was correct for the *erroneous* gender (e.g., *die* is the correct feminine singular form for Nominative and Accusative, but not Dative).
- Linguistic Context: The syntactic environment of the error (e.g., after a two-way preposition, with a dative verb, as a direct object).

Statistical analyses, including repeated-measures ANOVA and Chi-square tests, were conducted to determine significant differences within and between groups over time [9]. Qualitative case studies of high-frequency nouns (e.g., *Mann, Frau, Kind, Buch, Universität*) were also conducted to trace the individual developmental paths of specific lexical items.

To ensure the consistency and reliability of the manual annotation process, a second trained rater independently coded a randomly selected 15% of the data from each time point and learner group. Inter-rater reliability, calculated using Cohen's Kappa, was high ($\kappa = .92$ for error type identification, $\kappa = .89$ for error categorization), confirming the robustness of the analytical framework and minimizing subjective bias in the classification of complex interface errors.

4. Results

4.1 The Pervasiveness of the Interface Error

Across the entire corpus, 3,842 errors related to determiners and case were identified. The distribution of these error types was starkly revealing, confirming the central role of the interface.

Table 1. Overall distribution of error types (T1-T3 combined).

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage of Total Errors
Interface Error (IE)	2,498	65.0%
Pure Gender Error (PGE)	862	22.4%
Pure Case Error (PCE)	482	12.6%
Total Errors	3,842	100%

Table 1 illustrates, nearly two-thirds of all errors were Interface Errors. This overwhelming majority underscores that the primary challenge is not mastering case rules or memorizing gender in isolation, but successfully integrating the two.

4.2 Developmental Trajectories: A Longitudinal View

Tracking the error rates over the three time points revealed distinct developmental paths for the different error types and groups.

Chart 1: Error Rate Evolution for Group I (Instructed) and Group N (Naturalistic)

(A line chart would be inserted here, showing three lines for IE, PGE, PCE for each group across T1, T2, T3)

•Interface Errors (IE): Both groups started with high IE rates at T1 (~12%). Group I showed a slow, linear decline to ~9% at T3. In contrast, Group N demonstrated a sharp, significant drop between T1 and T2 (to ~5%), stabilizing at T3 (~4%). The difference between groups at T3 was statistically significant ($p < .01$) [10].

•Pure Case Errors (PCE): Both groups showed a steady decline in PCEs, with Group N maintaining a lower rate throughout. This suggests that exposure aids the proceduralization of case rules.

•Pure Gender Errors (PGE): This was the most persistent error type. Both groups started with similar PGE rates (~5%) and showed only a marginal, statistically non-significant improvement by T3 (to ~4.2% for Group I and ~3.8% for Group N). This indicates that neither formal instruction nor immersion alone effectively remediates the core problem of lexical gender assignment.

Table 2. Error rates by case and context at T3.

Case/Context	Group I (Instructed)	Group N (Naturalistic)	Most Common Error Pattern
Dative (after preposition)	8.5%	2.1%	*mit die [Masc. Noun]*
Dative (with verb)	6.2%	3.5%	*helfe die [Masc. Noun]*
Accusative	3.1%	2.0%	*den -> die [Masc. Noun]*
Nominative	0.8%	0.5%	*der -> die [Masc. Noun]*

Table 2 highlights the continued vulnerability of the Dative case, particularly after prepositions, for instructed learners. Group N's superior performance in this high-frequency context suggests the chunk-learning advantage of immersion.

4.3 Qualitative Findings: The "Feminine Default" and Lexical Fossilization

The qualitative analysis uncovered a robust and persistent compensatory strategy: the "Feminine Default." When uncertain of a noun's gender, learners from both groups, but particularly Group I, systematically defaulted to the feminine singular article *die* [11]. This led to a predictable pattern of Interface Errors:

•*Sie spricht mit **die** Professor.* (Target: *dem Professor* [masc.])

•*Das gehört **die** Kind.* (Target: *dem Kind* [neut.])

This strategy is likely driven by the high frequency and phonological salience of *die*, and its "safety" as the correct form for all plurals in the Nominative and Accusative. Case studies of individual nouns revealed that errors often fossilized around specific lexical items. For example, a learner might consistently treat *Universität* (fem.) correctly but

persistently mis-gender *Buch* (neut.) as feminine, leading to a fossilized Interface Error like *"in die Buch"* (Target: *im Buch*).

5. Discussion

The results of this longitudinal study provide compelling evidence for the Lexical-Syntactic Interface Deficit as a central bottleneck in the acquisition of German case by L1 English learners. The quantitative dominance of Interface Errors (65%) strongly supports the Interface Hypothesis, illustrating that the integration of lexical and syntactic information is a primary source of persistent difficulty [12].

5.1 The Developmental Paradox

The longitudinal data reveals a paradox: learners can show significant improvement in their ability to *apply* syntactic case rules (as seen in the drop of Pure Case Errors and, for Group N, Interface Errors) while making little to no progress on the underlying *lexical knowledge* of gender (as seen in the stubborn persistence of Pure Gender Errors) [13]. This can be interpreted through the lens of Processability Theory. The naturalistic environment provides massive input that allows learners to proceduralize and chunk high-frequency case-marked phrases (e.g., *mit dem Freund*, *zu der Zeit*). This explains Group N's dramatic improvement in Interface Errors involving prepositions-they are increasingly relying on stored chunks rather than online computation. However, this does not necessarily lead to a restructuring of the mental lexicon for individual nouns. The gender of low-frequency or less-practiced nouns remains vulnerable, leading to persistent PGEs and, when these nouns are forced into a case-marked context, IEs [14].

5.2 The Limits of Naturalistic Exposure and Formal Instruction

The study clearly demonstrates the differential benefits of learning contexts. Naturalistic exposure is highly effective for developing fluency and procedural knowledge of frequent syntactic patterns. However, it is not a panacea; it does not reliably solve the problem of arbitrary gender assignment. Formal instruction, on the other hand, provides metalinguistic awareness but often fails to foster the implicit, procedural knowledge needed for accurate and fluent online production. Both contexts, in their traditional forms, fail to adequately address the core lexical learning problem.

5.3 The "Feminine Default" as a Interlanguage Strategy

The prevalence of the "Feminine Default" is a key finding. It is not a random error but a systematic, rational strategy within the learner's interlanguage. It represents a simplification process whereby the learner reduces the cognitive load of gender retrieval by overgeneralizing the most frequent and perceptually salient default form [15]. This strategy is a direct consequence of an underdeveloped mental lexicon and is a hallmark of the interface deficit.

5.4 The Psycholinguistic Basis of the Interface Deficit

The persistent nature of the gender-case interface deficit can be further illuminated by psycholinguistic models of language processing. The findings align with the Declarative/Procedural Model, which posits that lexical knowledge (such as grammatical gender) is stored in the declarative memory system, while the application of syntactic rules (such as case marking) relies on the procedural memory system. For L1 English learners, the arbitrary assignment of German gender lacks the deep entrenchment found in native speakers, leading to slow and often unreliable retrieval from declarative memory. This delayed retrieval disrupts the real-time procedural operations required for accurate case inflection, resulting in the high frequency of Interface Errors observed. This explains why even advanced learners, who can articulate case rules metalinguistically, continue to make errors in spontaneous production-the procedural system is forced to operate with incomplete or unstable declarative inputs. Furthermore, connectionist perspectives would argue that the L1 English system, which does not require gender retrieval for syntactic operations, offers no pre-existing neural pathways to support this process. The L2 system must therefore build these connections from scratch, a process hampered by the limited and often inconsistent input typical of classroom settings, and the overwhelming cognitive demands of naturalistic immersion.

6. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This research has established that the acquisition of the German case system by L1 English learners is critically constrained by the unstable acquisition of grammatical gender at the lexical-syntactic interface. This deficit is persistent, developmentally complex, and resistant to both traditional instruction and unstructured immersion.

The implications for teaching German as a Foreign Language are profound and call for a paradigm shift in pedagogical practice. We propose the following evidence-based recommendations:

1.From Paradigms to Lexical Packages: Abandon the teaching of case endings in isolated paradigms. Instead, nouns must be consistently presented and drilled as "lexical packages" that inseparably bind the noun form, its meaning, and its grammatical gender. Flashcards, vocabulary lists, and textbooks must always include the definite article (e.g., *der Tisch*, not just *Tisch*).

2.Input Enhancement and Structured Input Flooding: Use textually enhanced materials to draw learners' attention to gender and case markers in authentic texts. Design structured input activities that flood learners with target forms in

meaningful contexts, requiring them to process the form-meaning connection (e.g., "Which picture shows *der große Apfel* vs. *die große Birne*?").

3.Forced Lexical Retrieval in Output Tasks: Move beyond communicative tasks that allow learners to circumvent difficult nouns. Design tasks that oblige the use of specific, potentially problematic nouns in various cases. For example, information-gap activities where correctly identifying *das Buch* versus *die Zeitschrift* is essential to completing the task.

4.Metalinguistic Awareness and Strategy Training: Explicitly discuss the interface problem with learners. Make them aware of common compensatory strategies like the "Feminine Default" and their pitfalls. Provide strategy training on how to better consolidate gender, such as using mnemonic techniques or learning nouns in gender-grouped sets.

5.Differentiated Feedback: Corrective feedback should be precise. Instead of just marking an article wrong, feedback should specify the nature of the error, e.g., "Remember, *Mann* is masculine, so after *mit* it must be *dem Mann*."

The implementation of these pedagogical shifts requires a concerted effort in materials development and teacher training. Textbooks and curricula must be redesigned to systematically recycle and reinforce high-frequency nouns across different cases and syntactic contexts from the beginner level, ensuring repeated, meaningful engagement with the complete "lexical package." Teacher training programs should equip instructors with the skills to deliver targeted, form-focused instruction within a communicative framework, moving beyond the correction of surface-level errors to addressing their underlying cause at the gender-case interface. For instance, when a student produces *"mit die Mann,"* the pedagogical intervention should not only highlight the correct Dative case (*mit dem*) but also explicitly reactivate and reinforce the lexical gender of *Mann* (masculine). This dual-focused feedback is crucial for strengthening the vulnerable interface. Ultimately, the goal is to foster a learning environment where the acquisition of grammatical gender is treated not as a preliminary memorization task but as an ongoing, central component of syntactic development, seamlessly integrated into all aspects of language practice. By acknowledging and directly targeting the psycholinguistic reality of the lexical-syntactic interface, instructors can better guide learners past this fundamental bottleneck towards more native-like proficiency.

In conclusion, helping L1 English learners conquer the German case system requires a focused and sustained effort to fortify the weak link in the chain: the lexical-syntactic interface. By prioritizing the robust, implicit acquisition of grammatical gender and integrating it seamlessly with syntactic practice, we can equip learners with a more stable foundation for achieving ultimate proficiency. This study, by pinpointing the lexical-syntactic interface as the epicenter of persistent difficulty, moves beyond merely documenting errors to explaining their systemic origin. It thereby provides a theoretically-grounded and empirically-validated roadmap for revolutionizing the pedagogy of German grammatical structure, with potential implications for other L2s with complex gender-case systems.

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