

German learners of English and the existential “there” construction

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The existential “there” construction is widely used in English and has been discussed from non-cognitive as well as from cognitive angles (e.g., Breivik 1981, Huckin & Hutz Pesante 1988, Bergen & Planché 2005, Jensen 2010). What has not been discussed are potential problems L2 learners of English might have with it. German has a semantic equivalent to the English existential construction “there is/there are”, namely “es gibt” (literally: “it gives”).

Although both German and English use a dummy subject construction, the two languages seem to differ concerning the existential meaning component, which in English is implicitly present in the “there” but which in the German construction is to be found in the verb. This may lead German learners of English to the misconception that the verb needs to have an existential component which not infrequently tempts them to insert the verb “exist” into the English “there” construction (as in **there exists the belief that...*), thereby reduplicating the amount of existential information, which is not admissible in English.

The contribution briefly discusses the differences between English existential “there” constructions and the German “es gibt” construction and then goes on to present, discuss and analyze the results of an experiment including about 100 advanced learners of English at B2 level (first-term students aiming at becoming teachers of English) who were asked to translate a German story containing several “es gibt” constructions into English. The learners found different solutions, not all of them felicitous. The research question underlying the study is whether and, if so, in how far the influence of the German mother tongue led the learners to add “existentiality” to the verbs they used in their translations. Another question is whether candidates who spent an extended time abroad in an English-speaking country were able to perform better than those who have not yet been abroad. As this is research in progress, the test results can not yet be summarized.

References

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