

Generative Second Language Acquisition & Foreign Language Teaching Winter 2009

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Course Content:

Generative Second Language Acquisition (GSLA):

This course will present a brief overview of generative second language (L2) acquisition, with the aim of relating it to foreign language teaching. Within this linguistic theory, certain principles of language are assumed to be innately present in the learners' first language (L1), helping to account for the fact that children acquire rather complex and subtle aspects of language even when these aspects are not obvious in the input. This innate structure is referred to as 'Universal Grammar' (UG). UG is assumed to contain fixed principles, as well as parameters which allow for variation across languages. Input data from the first language interact with these innate principles and parameters and eventually trigger the setting of the parameters. This, in turn, allows children to acquire the grammar of their native language. The goal of this approach to language acquisition is to formulate linguistic theories of second language acquisition.

Research on UG in generative second language acquisition has focused on whether principles and parameters of UG constrain L2 acquisition both during the course of learning and in ultimate attainment. L2 grammars have been found to diverge from the grammars of native speakers and this is often taken as sufficient evidence that principles of UG are not available. However, other researchers argue that while 'interlanguage' grammars may differ from the grammars of native speakers, they are nevertheless natural language systems constrained by universal principles.

The brief introduction to Generative Second Language Acquisition will examine the following topics: L2 initial state; the Full Transfer/Full Access hypothesis; parameter resetting; positive and negative evidence; the L2 lexicon.

Foreign Language Teaching:

Based on the brief introduction to Second Language Acquisition presented above, the course will explore various approaches to teaching foreign languages to adults that already have a developed linguistic system in place (i.e. their L1). That is, we will discuss the most effective ways to help a speaker of any language acquire a second language. Specifically, we will focus on the acquisition of Spanish and English as a second language and the difficulties these speakers encounter when acquiring the other language.

Course format:

This course will consist of a combination of lectures and discussion of relevant issues. Various approaches to teaching foreign languages will be presented. Students will have the chance to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the approaches and also create their own lesson plans according to class discussion.

Goals and objectives of the course:

Students should leave with a basic understanding of the main ideas of Generative Second Language Acquisition as well as the ability to apply this understanding to their approach to foreign language teaching. Students will be exposed to new approaches to foreign language teaching with the hopes that they will be able to employ these new approaches in their own classrooms. Our sessions are an open forum for discussion, so students are expected to actively participate in the discussions by analyzing the material presented as well as offering ideas and suggestions for the class.

Course Schedule

Date	Topic
Week 1: 15-19 June	Introduction to L1 acquisition and UG
Week 2: 22-26 June	Introduction to L2 acquisition and the role of UG in the initial state
Week 3: 29-3 July	The L2 classroom and the Role of the Teacher
Week 4: 6-10 July	L1 English, L2 Spanish: main difficulties
Week 5: 13-17 July	L1 Spanish, L2 English: main difficulties
Week 6: 20-24 July	Classroom Activities and Feedback
Week 7: 27-31 July	Classroom Activities and Testing Format
Week 8: 3-5 August	Wrap up

Week 1, Introduction to L1 acquisition and UG

Preliminary Task:

Thoughts on Language Acquisition (from SLA, Palacios & Arzamendi)

Questions for discussion:

How does one come to speak and understand their mother tongue?

Behaviorism: children are born without any predisposition for language learning, rather their linguistic knowledge is based on imitation and habit formation.

Cognitivist: children are born with a very specific innate knowledge of the nature of language and are thus, predisposed to acquire language. Children form hypotheses based on the input received and test them in speech and comprehension.

Who is responsible for this knowledge?

Are the Chinese biologically predisposed to speak and understand Chinese? Are the German biologically predisposed to speak and understand German?

What allows humans, as opposed to other mammals/animals, to speak languages?

UG: an innate mental faculty composed of substantive universals, formal universals and evaluation procedures. Substantive universals include distinctive phonetic features of which sounds are made of and syntactic categories such as noun, verb, subject and object.

Poverty of the stimulus (POS): How can we explain the fact that very subtle aspects of the L1 are universally acquired by all speakers even when they are not obvious in the language? Examples: interpretation of adjectives based on position in Spanish; the use of over subjects in Spanish; continuous versus discontinuous interrogatives in French

Week 2, Introduction to L2 acquisition and the role of UG in the initial state

Keeping last week's discussion of L1 acquisition in mind:

How does one come to speak and understand an L2?

How are the process and result different than L1 acquisition?

For example, children may utter their first word around 9 months, yet an adult learning an L2 can immediately produce words in the L2. However, adult L2 learners have problems with pronunciation and certain grammatical aspects while all children, barring pathological problems, come to be perfect speakers of the language.

FLA learners and SLA learners do not follow the same path of development. That is, the order in which certain aspects of the language are acquired by second language learners (L2ers) is not identical to the order in which first language learners (L1ers) acquire these same aspects.

The input received by L1ers and L2ers is both quantitatively and qualitatively different.

Cognitive factors may prove to be an advantage or a disadvantage for the L2er. Active pattern finding (e.g. verbal conjugations: 3rd singular past tense = *ó*) may aid the learner in memorization of the forms, but does not necessarily entail accurate mapping of the meaning to the form (telic event). On the other hand, the assumed pattern may be incorrect (e.g. *ser* = permanent states, *estar* = temporary conditions; counter example: *estar muerto*).

There is very little variation among L1ers (all more or less reach perfection in the L1) whereas there is a substantial amount of variation among L2ers (there is a wide gamut of proficiency).

What explains these differences?

How are the process and result similar to L1 acquisition?

While they differ in the specifics, L1ers and L2ers tend to follow a general pattern (i.e. present tense is acquired before past tense)

The transition problem: input and triggering

Week 3, The L2 classroom and the Role of the Teacher

In order to give our students the best opportunity to acquire a L2:

What should we focus on in class?

- communicative communication
- mapping the form to the meaning
- comprehensible input (from various sources and in various formats)
- meaningful topics

Modified speech (teacher talk/foreigner talk) or Modified interaction?

Optimal Learning Environment (adapted from Ellis (1985):

- high quantity and quality of input directed to the learner
- learner perceives the need to communicate in the L2
- meaningful topics
- ample opportunities to listen to and produce language used for different functions
- exposure to a high amount of directives
- exposure to a high amount of “extending utterances” (clarification and confirmation requests; paraphrasing; expansion; argumentation)
- opportunities for uninhibited practice (promoting experimentation with new forms)

The entire class should be conducted in the L1. This is important for all levels of learners, but it has a different purpose for each level. In terms of acquiring the target language and resetting parameters, beginners need as much input in the target language as possible. Psychologically, surviving a class period conducted strictly in the target language will give the learner confidence and help them get accustomed to the target language. Intermediate learners need reinforcement for the structures they have learned, so providing exemplary speech and a forum in which they can practice is necessary. Advanced learners should be able to function in an L2 environment, but need to be presented with challenging structures and situations in which they can use the language so that they are prepared and competent when immersed in the L2.

Input & Intake:

Input: The linguistic data the learner is exposed to and has access to

Intake: The portion of input that is processed and assimilated by the learner.

Role of the Teacher:

Facilitator

Deductive (teacher teaches the structure of the L2) versus Inductive approaches (student becomes aware of how the L2 works)

Analytic (focused on the L2) versus Experiential (focused on communication)

Habit Formation (repetition and memorization) versus Acquisition (unconscious process)

Week 4, L1 English, L2 Spanish: main difficulties

La ortografía (tildes--no entienden por qué son necesarios; explicación fonológica)

La pronunciación

Las conjugaciones verbales (no entienden por qué hay que conjugar los verbos ya que en inglés no hay muchas conjugaciones verbales)

La concordancia (sujeto y verbo; artículo, sustantivo y adjetivo)

SE (se pasivo, se impersonal, se reflexivo, 'madre')

El imperfecto versus el subjuntivo (descripción versus acción/acción completada versus acción no completada)

Los objetos directos e indirectos (ubicación y significado (suelen usarlos como sujetos))

El subjuntivo

Las palabras negativas e indefinidas

El uso de los artículos definidos e indefinidos

La sintaxis en general (el sintagma determinante; las preguntas)

Week 5, L1 Spanish, L2 English: main difficulties

Pronunciation

Do-support (questions; negation)

Subjects: Embedded subjects, weather expletives and copulas

Adverbial placement

Accidental Gender Agreement ('his father' masculine-masculine for 'her father' feminine-masculine)

Double negation

Any questions from the students? (I'm sure other things will come up in the tutoring sessions)

Week 6, Classroom activities and Corrective Feedback

Activities: should promote real communication of meaning; tasks should create a need for meaningful language use; if the language is meaningful to the L2er, the task will be more effective

PACE Activities (**P**resentation, **A**ttention, **C**omprehension, **E**xtension)

Comprehensible input in the form of short songs and videos (things to keep in mind)

Information-gap activities

Opinion-gap activities

Real-world activities: newspaper articles, poems, songs, current events

The importance of “pre” and “post” activities

Games: while not as formal, games provide a stress-free environment for students to practice their oral and listening skills and it also provides a great opportunity for them to practice vocabulary (matamoscas, jeopardy, actua como si fueras, la pasarela, adivina tu futuro, madlibs, Simon says, ¡a regatear!, bingo)

Avoid yes/no questions and activities; instead promote information based questions and activities

Corrective Feedback:

What purpose does correction serve?

Errors versus Mistakes

What is the source of errors in L2?

What is the most effective way to give corrective feedback? How much? Focus on content, too!

Recasting (saying the correct form after the incorrect utterance)

- many times the student doesn't realize they are being corrected
- however, it can be useful for the rest of the class
- it is not salient

Metalinguistic (feedback this type of feedback is similar to a mini-grammar lesson in which the L2er does the majority of the work but is guided by the teacher)

- the form and meaning of the utterance are brought to the conscious attention of the L2er
- an attempt at getting the L2er to map the correct form with their desired meaning is made

--the L2er is asked guiding questions so that they arrive at the correct form on their own

Elicitation and clarification questions (the teacher checks their understanding of the utterance by asking follow-up questions allowing for the student to clarify using correct forms)

--suppose a student is talking about what he and his brother did this weekend and omits the over subject by saying *went to the movies*. The teacher asks questions to clarify the meaning behind the utterance and encourages the L2er to correct the utterance so it is understandable.

Week 7, Classroom activities and Testing Format

What should the exams consist of?

Exams should reflect the skills covered and practice in class. It is best to avoid the common format of fill-in-the-blank style tests. These tests do not reinforce the connection that needs to be made between the form and its meaning. It promotes memorization and ‘quick fixes.’ Ideally, exams should cover the four basic skills of language: speaking, writing, reading and listening. The first three skills will allow the students to use the language presented in class in a generative way. That is, the first three skills allow the student to produce language in a way that is meaningful as opposed to simply memorizing and filling in a blank. Listening skills are obviously necessary and students should be provided with ample practice so that they are able to function in the L2 environment.

Students should have ample opportunities to express themselves orally and should also be tested on these skills. A good format to follow is to test students in a way that allows them to be creative and generate language that is meaningful to them while forcing the use of specific grammatical points (i.e., *¿Qué te gustaba hacer de niño?* Forces the use of the imperfect).

Writing should also be a major part of students’ assignments as it forces them to practice the orthography and grammar of the language. Some students find writing to be an easier form of self-expression.

Finally, it is crucial to develop reading skills, as reading increases students’ vocabulary and presents them with challenging grammar.