

Manages debated  
and controversial  
topic in english



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The way in which our innate language abilities are able to influence how successfully we manage to use a language is a somewhat debated and controversial topic within the world of linguistics. Many believe that universal grammar has a very strong influence on how well an individual is able to structure sentences and use grammar while others disagree, at least with regard to how important it is in different situations. It is often argued that universal grammar has at least a moderate influence on first language acquisition, but the affect it has on second language acquisition is where the controversies lie, with many researchers having opposing opinions.

Individuals who learn a foreign language frequently experience problems with using correct grammar, at least until they are very advanced in the acquisition process. A lot of the time, individuals learning a second language take a very long time to become as proficient as native speakers are, and they even often never reach the same level of proficiency as native speakers of the language. The significance of this is highly debated however, with a variety of causes being outlined as possible from many different studies.

Time and time again, it has been shown that individuals who learn a second language often use grammar inappropriately, even when they may be at least moderately accustomed to the language and have been learning it for a reasonably long amount of time. For example, Lu (2001) found that Chinese learners speaking English often used the word " the" when it would be more correct to use " a". This is a trend that has been found in many so-called L2 learners (i. e. people who are learning a second language). Interestingly however, such errors have also been found in the acquisition of English as a first language. A good example of this was in a study by Schaeffer and

Mathewson in 2005. They found that children learning English as a first language make very similar errors to the errors individuals learning a second language make. They also state that children seem to start off by obeying what seem to be innate universal grammar principals, but as their learning develops, they eventually start to apply the rules of the language in the way adults do (through learning, conditioning and observation). The suggestion here therefore is that universal language is the cause of this incorrect grammar usage in both children learning to speak and in adults learning a second language, at least to some degree. This implies that universal grammar may indeed have a role in second language acquisition, since it seems that there are certain innate rules of language development that everyone follows - right or wrong.

Of course, many other studies imply that universal grammar influences the individual to speak properly rather than wrongly (albeit, at a different stage of the language acquisition process). It is argued that the input an individual receives when learning a language is not enough to allow them to successfully and properly use grammar, therefore meaning innate language abilities have a strong influence on language development, at least with regard to first language acquisition and likely with second acquisition too (White, 1985).

A big question is raised from this theory of universal grammar being so integral to successful language development. When considering the idea that a large part of grammar ability may be innate, one must question how to differentiate between innate language abilities and learned language knowledge - knowledge that (for L2 learners) was gained from the learning <https://assignbuster.com/manages-debated-and-controversial-topic-in-english/>

of their first language. To differentiate between innate and learned phenomena, there are two areas to be considered (White, 1990). Firstly, the input the individual receives for learning the language should be insufficient for the phenomenon to be present. Secondly, it should be different from phenomena learned as part of the first language. The fulfilment of both of these criteria could - in theory - mean an innate language ability is responsible for the production of the specific phenomenon in the L2 learning.

Most studies into L2 language acquisition have been based around adult learners. Zdorenko and Paradis (2007) however carried out a study into second language learning in children. Within this study, they addressed numerous questions, taking into account how much first language background affects second language acquisition. Their conclusions were that the children's' first language influenced their acquisition early on in the learning process, but not later on, once the child had become more competent. They do not directly suggest that any part of the L2 learning however is innate, and instead suggest that article semantics could be responsible for the presence of certain phenomena.

The idea that universal grammar may have a role in the development of first language acquisition is generally more accepted than the idea that it plays a role in second language acquisition. This largely could be to do with the fact that determining a role for innate language abilities at the stage of learning a second language is a lot more challenging, since with first language acquisition the only confounding factor that needs to be taken into account is the level of input the learner receives about the language.

Flynn (1996) suggested a model for the role of universal grammar in L2 learners. The model has 3 possibilities: the no access hypothesis, the partial access hypothesis and the full access hypothesis. The no access hypothesis states that universal grammar simply is not accessible to L2 learners and all learning is simply due to input the learner gains. The partial access hypothesis claims that universal grammar is partially available to the L2 learner, but only those parameters that characterise first language phenomena are available. The full access hypothesis states that universal grammar is completely available to L2 learners and that any differences between first and second language acquisition can be accounted for via other ways.

If any part of this model is correct, it seems unlikely that it is the full access hypothesis. As stated previously, much evidence exists suggesting L2 language acquisition is rarely ever as complete as first language acquisition. Or at least, it is a much slower process and it takes a long time for L2 learners to become as proficient in the language as native speakers.

Hale (1996) suggests that universal grammar is very difficult to distinguish from first language acquisition in L2 learners, implying that the two are almost one of the same. Indeed, many researchers agree with the idea that universal language is something that goes hand-in-hand with first language acquisition, but not with second language acquisition.

It seems that the matter of how involved universal language is in second language acquisition may never be resolved. On one hand, the presence of certain phenomena in L2 that are absent in the first language along with

evidence that the phenomena have not been learned suggest that maybe innate language skill do have a role in L2 learning, however evidence from Zdorenko and Paradis (2007) along with other studies suggest that innate language abilities at least don't hold the most significant level of importance.

If universal grammar does have a role in the learning of a second language, Flynn's hypothesis of partial access would arguably seem most plausible. The fact that many individuals learning a second language never become fully competent at it suggests that full access is not possible, since this would therefore suggest no variation in the ability to speak a second language from the ability to speak a first language. No access however seems unlikely to, since the fact that there are similarities in the mistakes L2 learners and children learning a first language make implies that there is some innate mechanism governing language ability; a mechanism all individuals have that predisposes them to language and which diminishes as they age but never fades. This theory is further backed up by the fact that, within the Zdorenko and Paradis study, they found that the children had features of language acquisition in common with both first and second language acquisition, implying that maybe their innate language skills (due to their age) were having an affect (although this is not an idea that is pointed out within the study).

The 'critical period' hypothesis is a well-known theory of language acquisition which states that children are much more primed for learning languages than adults. This hypothesis fits together very well with the partial access hypothesis. The critical period hypothesis is widely accepted by a large number of linguists. One of the best known examples here is that of <https://assignbuster.com/manages-debated-and-controversial-topic-in-english/>

Genie, a girl brought up in social isolation, who started to learn to talk at a late age (Curtiss, 1977). Although she was shown to not be mentally impaired, she was never able to learn to speak properly. It is most likely this was due to her age and her inability therefore to gain full access to her innate language abilities. Therefore, universal grammar seems to be something that very possibly does influence L2 learning and adult learners, but its effect diminishes with age, and therefore children can learn languages - first, second and beyond - more effectively than adults.