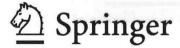Melinda Whong
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Universal Grammar and the Second Language Classroom

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Editors

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Springer

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Printed on acid-free paper

Universal Grammar and the Second Language Classroom

Educational Linguistics

Volume 16

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Acknowledgement

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Chapter 1
Introduction: Generative Second Language Acquisition and Language Pedagogy

Melinda Whong, Kook-Hee Gil, and Heather Marsden

1.1   Introduction

For the uninitiated, it might seem quite obvious that research in second language acquisition is of relevance to the profession of language teaching. Yet in reality this relationship is not very clear, especially in terms of more formal approaches to second language acquisition and Chomskyan generative second language acquisition (henceforth GenSLA), in particular. From the point of view of language pedagogy, the question of what role theory should play in practice is one of continuous debate. This is not a trivial question; researchers need to isolate variables in order to investigate phenomena. In doing so, the complexity of reality is immediately compromised. Teachers, by contrast, must contend with reality in all of its complexity whether an explanation exists or not. Nevertheless, assuming that being able to explain phenomena means having a better understanding, we take the view that the more classroom instruction is underpinned by an understanding of theoretical principles, the more effective it will be. Accepting, then, that there is a role for theory, there is the added question of which theories.[1] As noted some time ago by

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[1]For more discussion of the relationship between theory and practice in language teaching, see Cumming (2008) and the subsequent TESOL Symposium papers.

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Stern (1983), the practice of language teaching implicates assumptions from a number of areas of inquiry ranging from language to learning, to education, and to society. Clearly, even if we limit ourselves to language and learning, this still leaves us with a broad arena of research as the range of subfields within these two subjects is as diverse as it is wide.

A key aim of this volume is to present GenSLA research as a body of theory-driven evidence about L2 acquisition that classroom research and practice could usefully draw on. This aim has emerged partly in response to the recent 'social turn' in educational linguistics (Firth and Wagner 1997; Block 2003), which focuses on the social context in relation to classroom interaction and thus downplays the role of grammar teaching. The need to address a broader range of pedagogic factors—including social context—in the language classroom is captured in the well-known appeal by Brumfit (1991:46) for more emphasis on 'real-world problems in which language is the central issue'. While we agree that language teaching should include a wide range of considerations, we are also eager to ensure that there is no erosion of expertise in the fundamentals of language within language pedagogy. There is a real possibility of decreasing linguistic expertise given the diverse nature of academic interest in language learning at present. Such a decrease in itself could be seen as one reason for a widening gap between linguistic theory and language teaching practice. (For more discussion, see Piske and Young-Scholten 2009; Whong 2011; Chap. 2 by Bruhn de Garavito, this volume) A second aim of this volume, then, is to propose ways of bridging the theory–practice gap.

The volume addresses these aims by challenging a number of GenSLA researchers—many of whom also have experience as language teachers—to explore applications of GenSLA research to the language classroom. Specifically, we asked a range of GenSLA researchers, from early career to the very experienced, to each take a different area of GenSLA research and to explore it in terms of implications for the language classroom. What has resulted is what we hope will be a ground-breaking volume with three ambitious aims: (i) to highlight the value of formal linguistic expertise and of findings from GenSLA research to the language class-room, (ii) to inspire other GenSLA researchers to consider pedagogical implications of their research and (iii) to spark a dialogue with researchers of second language learning outside the GenSLA paradigm.

As there are very few examples of applied GenSLA in the current literature to use as a model,[2] each author has approached this challenge in their own way. Some have engaged in classroom research, testing the effectiveness of teaching particular linguistic phenomena. Others review existing research findings in GenSLA, discussing how these findings are useful for language pedagogy. Most authors echo the theme that knowledge of generative linguistics will provide teachers with needed expertise. Some go further, showing that the grammar included in most language teaching textbooks is lacking in terms of certain basic properties of language now well understood among linguists. What unites them all is the conviction that

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[2] A few leading examples are Rothman (2008, 2010) and Long and Rothman (2013).

GenSLA research can inform language pedagogy. Importantly, however, no one is claiming that GenSLA is the only approach that is useful to the classroom. Nor is there any attempt to suggest a generative model for language teaching or new teaching methods. Instead, GenSLA is offered as a principled basis for considerations of language pedagogy, with contributions in terms of an understanding of the properties of language as well as how knowledge of those properties develops as a result of exposure to language input.

In the next section, we will explore some of the fundamental tenets of generative theory in order to provide background for those readers who may not be grounded in generative linguistics. We will not attempt a comprehensive introduction to generative theory, referring the reader to one of the many introductory texts that already exist.[3] Instead, we provide background on the broad conceptual basis of core generative thinking, showing how the essence of the theory has remained constant despite continuous evolution in the specifics of the theory since it was first proposed. We also refer the reader to the chapters of this volume themselves, where more specific background can be found which situates the content of each chapter. We draw particular attention to the opening chapter by Bruhn de Garavito, which includes more historical background on the divide between the language pedagogic community and GenSLA, as a starting point for bridging the divide which she addresses by examining the acquisition of L2 Spanish object pronouns.

1.2   Conceptual Foundations

1.2.1   Generative Linguistic Theory

The title of this volume—Universal Grammar and the Second Language Classroom—reflects the contributors' shared view of language and language development. All authors assume that Universal Grammar (UG)—in the form of a set of innate principles about grammar formation—underpins language acquisition by constraining the form of possible grammars. It is, of course, true that the exact mechanisms posited within the generative paradigm to capture UG in formal terms have changed as the theory has developed, from early transformational models (e.g. Chomsky 1957) to Government–Binding theory within the Principles and Parameters model (Chomsky 1981) and to the current instantiation of the theory as the Minimalist Programme (Chomsky 1995). It is also true that new sets of complex theorems and associated terminology signal changes in understanding of the formal mechanisms among generative theorists. Yet, the core of the theory has remained constant throughout

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[3]For example, both Katamba et al. (2011) and Fasold and Connor-Linton (2006) include useful introductory chapters on generative linguistics and first and second language acquisition.

these changes. Specifically, generative theory holds that there is an innate set of constraints that are distinct for language development, and these constraints (i.e. UG) serve to guide the language acquisition process. This innate linguistic knowledge is argued to account for the awe-inspiring fact that very young children come to know very complex language systems in a relatively short amount of time and after exposure to limited data (namely, the utterances that they hear from caregivers)— without making errors that might be predicted if the acquisition process were unconstrained. The observation that children attain highly complex linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of phenomena for which the input they encounter does not contain direct evidence, is referred as 'poverty of the stimulus'. The fact that children overcome the poverty-of-the-stimulus problem inherent in language acquisition is the key motivation for the postulation of UG.

Principles and Parameters is perhaps the best known, and most accessible, UG model. Within this model, UG consists of a set of principles that are crosslinguistically invariant, and parameters whose values must be set on the basis evidence from the target language being acquired. The principles constrain structure building across different languages in a unified way. For example, there is a principle of consistent hierarchical organisation from the word level to the phrasal level (known as the X'-schema), which applies to all languages. Parameters, on the other hand, determine crosslinguistic variation, by offering finite sets of options from which learners (subconsciously) choose, depending on the input that they encounter. A well-known example is the null subject parameter, which can be argued to offer two settings: [+null subject] for languages where null subjects are the norm and [−null subject] for languages where subjects are obligatory. A learner acquiring English will select [−null subject] based on the evidence of use of subjects in the input.[4] Once a given parameter value is set, other parameters associated with that setting may also be automatically set, thereby fast-tracking the learner toward the target grammar.

As the Principles and Parameters model has evolved into the Minimalist Programme, attention has shifted to the interaction of different domains within the grammar (e.g. syntax with semantics and pragmatics). In this model, the term *narrow syntax* refers to the recursive procedure of structure building. The explanation of how syntactic structures are compatible with meaning on the one hand and sound systems on the other lies in the 'interface' of syntax with other core linguistic domains such as semantics and phonology, as well as with pragmatics and discourse. These latter two have recently been referred to as external domains because they lie outside the core computational component in terms of what has traditionally been seen as fundamental to generative theory.

Commitment to the notion of parameters has remained constant in generative theory, despite changes in specific approaches. Early efforts saw attempts to capture all crosslinguistic difference in clearly defined clusters of properties, each with

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[4]The notion of a null subject parameter has been extensively researched and refined. See e.g. Chapter 5 in Guasti (2002) for an overview. See also Kizu (Chap. 3, this volume).

an unambiguous trigger. The earliest example of parameterisation was Rizzi's proposal that the limits on movement due to so-called bounding nodes differ from language to language (Rizzi 1982). Since then, numerous parameters have been put forward to capture crosslinguistic differences, from the aforementioned null subject parameter to the verb movement parameter (Pollack 1989) and the compounding parameter (Snyder 2001), to name a few. As more and more parameters were proposed, Baker (2001), aiming to better explain how a child could work through the maze of parameters, made an ambitious attempt to situate the full set of parameters in binary relationships with each other, proposing a polysynthesis parameter as the most basic parameter. Within Minimalism, a different view of how parameters are instantiated has emerged, following an insight due to Borer (1984), which connects crosslinguistic variation to properties of lexical items. In this view, UG includes a universal inventory of features, and languages differ in terms of which of these features are selected and combined into the given language's lexical items. Despite these different approaches to parameters (i.e. as customisable rules within the grammar in Principles and Parameters, but as assemblies of features on lexical items within Minimalism), there remains consensus on the underlying premise that parameters are needed in order to capture the reality of crosslinguistic variation. The differences between approaches are limited to questions of the precise mechanisms needed to capture this variation.

Shifts in the mechanisms proposed for parameters parallel other shifts in the technicalities of generative theory while keeping the fundamental basis of the theory intact. For those not actively working within generative theory, the resulting changes to terminology can seem baffling. However, since the basis of the theory remains constant, researchers within the generative framework are able to adopt the latest terminology when the specific linguistic phenomenon at the focus of their work calls for it. The chapters in this volume are typical from this point of view, with some employing terminology associated with earlier theoretical formalisms and some with later. Running through all chapters, however, is a commitment to the basis of the generative paradigm: namely UG as an innate linguistic endowment that constrains language acquisition and can capture crosslinguistic variation in a principled way.

1.2.2   Generative Second Language Acquisition

While the efforts of generative linguists have always centred around the structural properties of the grammar and have been understood to apply to the native language context, there have, for decades, also been generativists researching adult second language development. Thus, a second point that unites the authors in this volume is an assumption of some role for 'acquisition' in second language development, in the sense of developing underlying competence in the target language, which is different from merely 'learning' target language structures. The distinction between acquisition and learning is most often associated with Krashen and his attempts to

make sense of developments in linguistic theory in the context of language teaching (Krashen 1985). As discussed in more detail by Whong (Chap. 12, this volume), the relationship between acquired and learned knowledge within SLA has been for the most part limited to the question of whether learned knowledge can become a part of acquired knowledge (Schwartz 1993). Even for those who hold to the so-called strong interface[5] position between the two types of knowledge, however, there have always been questions of learnability. As clearly laid out by White (2003), the heart of the poverty-of-the-stimulus claim is the mismatch between the input that any learner is exposed to and the ultimate knowledge of language, which extends beyond the input. This mismatch is all the more remarkable when considering not only the intrinsically complex nature of language but also the ambiguous and confusing nature of the input that L2 learners, especially cognitively mature adult learners, are exposed to. From the point of view of GenSLA, this poverty-of-the-stimulus mismatch holds whether one is learning one's first, second or fifth language.[6] And for the second language context, there is the added complexity of an existing, fully developed language. For this reason, attention in early GenSLA research was devoted primarily to questions of parameter resetting and native language transfer.

Advances stemming from more sophisticated understanding of different domains of language—including the theoretical transition from Principles and Parameters to Minimalism—have also led to expansion of the initial focus within GenSLA. Much research in the late 1990s, for example, explored differences in the development of syntax and morphology, with many concluding that there is a 'mapping' problem as learners have to map linguistic features onto particular forms which may or may not resemble those in their native language (e.g. Lardiere 2000). More recent GenSLA research parallels larger trends in generative linguistics, exploring areas of language beyond core competence. Investigation of the relationships between narrow syntax and the domains of discourse/pragmatics has led to the recent Interface Hypothesis (Belletti et al. 2007; Sorace and Filiaci 2006; Sorace and Serratrice 2009) which proposes that constructions that implicate both domains will cause more difficulties for the learner than those that are restricted to one domain of language. Another recent proposal argues that both syntax and meaning are acquirable, in contrast with functional morphology, which is seen as creating a bottleneck for second language acquisition (Slabakova 2008). GenSLA researchers have also begun to direct attention to issues of processing (e.g. Juffs 1998, 2006) and, more recently, neurolinguistics (e.g. Yusa et al. 2011). Concomitant develop-ments have been seen in the data collection methods employed by GenSLA researchers, with moves to incorporate techniques from psycholinguistic research (such as reaction time studies) and language pedagogy (using more contextualised

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[5] See Whong (Chap. 12, this volume) for discussion of the different uses of the term 'interface' in generative theory.

[6] See Hawkins (2001) and White (2003) for more explanation of UG and poverty of the stimulus within the context of second language acquisition.

tasks instead of uncontextualised sentence judgement tasks, which have traditionally been common in GenSLA research).[7]

Where this volume diverges from more traditional aims of GenSLA is in its interest in exploring questions of *learning* which result from explicit teaching, in addition to questions of *acquisition*. As we come to understand the precise nature of linguistic phenomena more fully, the burden for the learner is even more clear. For the second language researcher, it is a natural step to ask whether it is possible to appeal to the intellect of the adult learner in order to teach specific properties of language. Until now, most GenSLA researchers have been interested in investigating whether acquisition can eventually occur once there has been enough input, and in exploring corresponding developmental stages and how such development is affected by the existing native language. The contributions in this volume seek to go beyond 'passive' acquisition to explore the role of explicit teaching in second language development. While some chapters explore whether explicit teaching leads to implicit acquisition, others ask whether learned metalinguistic knowledge can lead to improved abilities in comprehending and producing language. The extent to which such abilities might implicate acquired knowledge or learned knowledge remains an open question which requires further consideration.

In exploring questions of acquisition and learning, one central theme of this volume is that decades of research have revealed a large set of very subtle properties of language which should prove useful in aiding teachers to help learners make sense of the language they are learning. It is the understanding of the structural properties of language which sets the generative view apart from those working within the functional or cognitive paradigms. For GenSLA researchers, the cornerstone assumption that language is more than just a list of words, collocations or constructions means that learners must come to know the complex system that regulates grammatical output. For a number of chapters in this volume, one aim is to raise the level of awareness of existing linguistic generalisations as understood by generative theorists for those not working within the generative framework. With increased understanding, teachers will be prepared to teach specific properties of language.

In sum, we identify two key, recent trends within GenSLA. First, the field has expanded its enquiry beyond syntax to other domains such as semantics and discourse, to the interfaces between these domains (see White 2011 for an overview), and to other cognitive factors such as processing. Second, recent GenSLA research has focused increasingly on the question of which linguistic properties are easily acquirable and which are problematic. If particular domains or interfaces beyond syntax are found to be resistant to *acquisition*, the question arises of whether they are also resistant to *learning*. Or, to return to the well-known debate: can learning facilitate acquisition? It seems that now is the time to return to the fundamental question of learning in relation to acquisition. In one way or another, each of the chapters

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[7]Many of the test instruments used by GenSLA researchers can be found in the Instruments for Research into Second Language Learning and Teaching (IRIS) database: <http://www. iris-database.org>.