

IS GRAMMATICAL INSTRUCTION HELPFUL FOR ALL ADULT LEARNERS? A CRITICAL REVIEW OF QUANTITATIVE SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION RESEARCH

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While mainstream SLA research continues to uphold the efficacy of grammatical instruction, critical approaches have begun to question pedagogical strategies that rely on traditional notions of language and language learning. I analyze the tension between these perspectives by critically examining two influential reviews, arguing that past work on grammatical instruction is rooted in hegemonic conceptions of language, which limit this work's applicability to real-life adult immigrant students and potentially perpetuate inequality. Such issues are reflective of larger concerns in SLA research in general, and point to the need to reconceptualize second language acquisition so that it is relevant to the needs of actual adult learners.

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Within quantitative second language acquisition (SLA) research, it is widely accepted that grammatical instruction—teaching that explicitly and deliberately focuses on linguistic form—aids language learning (Gass, 2013). This belief is commonplace among teachers as well, with many incorporating grammatical instruction into their pedagogy (Afitska, 2015). Critical approaches to linguistics, however, have pointed out the problematic ideologies behind traditional conceptions of languages as bounded grammatical systems (Makoni & Pennycook, 2006), and are therefore wary of language education that relies on such notions (Flores & Rosa, 2015; García & Li Wei, 2014). These critics warn that grammatical instruction is not only unnecessary, but is in fact detrimental, perpetuating historical inequalities and discouraging development of meaningful linguistic skills, especially among minoritized speakers.

To help reconcile the two perspectives, this paper takes a closer look at the existing literature, critically examining two influential reviews (Long, 1983; Norris & Ortega, 2000). While I focus on the studies included in these reviews, I direct my critique not at any individual author but at mainstream approaches in quantitative SLA as a whole, particularly in terms of their relevance to adult immigrant learners. I argue that past work on grammatical instruction overgeneralizes the experience of formally educated and middle-class adult language learners and reduces the language learning process to the acquisition of an idealized linguistic competence, ignoring the variation and complexity of actual performance. This in turn obscures the claims of these studies, limiting their applicability to real-life classrooms or the lived experiences of adult immigrant students, and potentially re-inscribes inequality. Such issues are reflective of larger concerns in SLA research and point to the need to reconceptualize second language acquisition so that it is relevant to the needs of actual adult learners.

A Review of the Literature

Since the second half of the twentieth century, an immense amount of SLA research has investigated the role of grammatical instruction. One influential example is Long's (1983) review of studies from the 1960s and 1970s on the effect of formal instruction (that is, instruction explicitly adhering to linguistic forms) on second language learning. Focusing on 11 studies, Long sought out definitive information on the effect of instruction versus natural practice. While Long reanalyzed the methodologies and results, he generally agreed with his colleagues' findings. In six of the studies, grammatical instruction was shown to have a positive effect on second language acquisition; in two, due to methodological issues, the results were ambiguous and/or uninterpretable. The final three indicated no effect for instruction, positive or negative.

Based on these results, Long concluded that grammatical instruction does make a positive difference. Further, in light of the range of populations and methodologies represented in the studies he reviewed, Long proposed that this effect holds for “children as well as adults” and “intermediate and advanced students, not just beginners”; on “integrative as well as discrete-point tests”; and “in acquisition-rich as well as acquisition-poor environments” (p. 374)—conclusions that quickly became widely accepted. After Long’s determinations were known, most researchers agreed that while learners might be able to acquire a language naturalistically, they will do so more quickly or more successfully with the help of explicit grammatical instruction, especially if exposure is limited.

These results have been replicated in a series of increasingly sophisticated and far-reaching reviews, the most extensive being Norris and Ortega’s (2000) massive meta-analysis. Rather than using a vote-counting method, as Long (1983) did, they compared average effect sizes from 49 different studies on second language instruction practices common in the 1980s and 1990s.

An analysis of both effect sizes and magnitudes of pre- to post-test change in the studies surveyed revealed that grammatical instruction seemed to make a substantial and statistically significant difference. In line with Long’s conclusions, Norris and Ortega interpreted this as evidence of the effectiveness of grammatical instruction. The explicitness of the instruction also proved significant: rule-oriented approaches led to larger post-test gains than did implicit approaches. Overall, they note, these effects decreased over time, but this decrease was modulated by length of instructional treatment; more extensive instruction led to durable gains in second language ability. Almost twenty years later, Long’s claims about the positive effect of grammatical instruction on second language development continued to be supported by empirical data.

Together, these two reviews comprise 60 individual studies and four decades of research pointing to the positive effects of grammatical instruction. Both continue to be cited in contemporary research as evidence for the efficacy of explicit grammatical instruction (Gass, 2013; Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 2012), and grammatical teaching techniques remain popular (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 2016). In fact, in the years since Norris and Ortega’s article, the issue has hardly been a focus of major research, though there have been some studies replicating Norris and Ortega’s approach (e.g., Goo, Granena, Yilmaz, & Novella, 2015). Those working in critical approaches, however, remain dubious regarding such claims. As the next section indicates, a critical examination of this work lends credence to any wariness and points to the disconnect between mainstream SLA research and real-life language use, especially the language learning needs of adult immigrant students.

A Closer (and More Critical) Look

Upon close inspection of the studies reviewed in these surveys, there are indeed several underlying issues that problematize claims about the benefits of instruction. The first is the *homogeneity of the participants*. Since the early 1980s, the vast majority of adult SLA research has focused on students enrolled in university-level second language programs (Young-Scholten, 2013). This pattern certainly holds true in Norris and Ortega’s review: of the 77 studies initially reviewed, the majority (51) used college students as participants (Norris & Ortega, 2000, p. 454). This is partly due to convenience; for researchers who are predominantly working at universities, college students are the most easily accessible language learners, and their shared educational backgrounds make the actual testing process easier as well. The focus on college students is also a result of current epistemological biases within experimental SLA. Generative and modular theories of language dominate in this area, and thus social factors are often considered irrelevant (Young-Scholten, 2013). Within this perspective, Noam Chomsky’s (1965) universal grammar should work the same in every human brain, so social and cultural variables are not of interest.

But such an approach does not seem to be grounded in reality. The relatively few studies comparing adults with low literacy to their counterparts in college point to qualitative differences in skills that are often considered integral to traditional academic learning. Research has shown, for example, that low-literacy adults perform differently compared to literate adults (and children) in terms of segmentation of aurally perceived words and sentences, attendance to word order, and memory (Bigelow & Watson, 2013). These skills are explicitly invoked in form-focused instruction, so if these trends are true for low-literacy adults in general, that finding has serious implications for what research on grammatical instruction means for adult language learners in all their diversity. Populations that differ in how they perceive language and what features they are attuned to would likely benefit from different types of instruction.

This is not to say that college students are not worthy test subjects. Their experiences can certainly teach us something about language acquisition, and it is hoped that the knowledge gained will in turn make their language learning more effective. But it is disappointing that the most vulnerable language learners—working-class adult immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, for example—remain understudied and therefore underserved. These students deserve to be a priority in future research.

But it is not enough merely to do the same experiments with a new population; the research questions themselves must become more relevant to adult immigrant language learners. This brings us to the second, and larger, issue, which relates to the *conception of language and language learning* in these studies and in SLA in general. In this work, the epistemological legacy of colonialism is evident in a reliance on named (Standard) languages, where linguistic variation is erased and certain grammatical rules are expected to apply consistently in all circumstances among all speakers (Makoni & Pennycook, 2006). Language learning essentially becomes the learning of a very particular set of rules.

As a result, in studies that value traditional concepts and rules, learners are assessed not according to their success in completing a communicative task, but in how they deployed particular forms during that task. The learners only get recognized credit if they use the target form according to the norms established by the researcher; finding another way to communicate the information or using a variable form does not count, even though these are normal communicative strategies.

Overall, these studies rely on assessments that focus on a few points of discrete knowledge, rather than on a global ability to negotiate meaning. The distinction is important because the question of how grammatical knowledge relates to real communicative ability is still open. Of course, *some* connection is there—shared norms of usage make communication possible. But grammar and communicative competence are not equivalent. We have all known students who can ace an exam but cannot perform at the same level in a natural conversation. Thinking of these learners, it is easy to imagine a student who shows pre- to post-test gains in terms of one grammatical feature but without improving in conversational ability. Conversely, there are quite a few adult language learners who successfully develop meaningful relationships and manage complex transactions without appearing to know much about Standard grammar. Wes, an adult immigrant in Hawaii, is one well-known example (Schmidt, 1983).

With these cases in mind, it is clear that being able to use a “language” is about more than grammatical knowledge. As a result, we cannot be sure that the tests used in these grammatical instruction studies are actually measuring language acquisition; we only know that they are measuring how well students remember a specific rule. The importance of this type of outcome measure in Norris and Ortega’s study reinforces this perspective. Though all outcome measures showed a positive effect for instruction, the average effect sizes were substantially lower for more open-ended formats than for more discrete styles of evaluation; instruction was less effective when the assessment was closer to actual communication. In the years since, research practices have not changed much. Contemporary research overwhelmingly continues to employ explicit outcome measures—which in turn inherently support more explicit treatments in instruction. This bias in favor of instruction renders the results of such studies extremely difficult to interpret in terms of real-world applicability.

Some researchers, particularly those working in a generative framework, might argue that they are concerned with linguistic competence, not performance, thus invoking Chomsky’s classic dichotomy (1965). When we are talking about real learners living in a real world, however, that difference does not really matter. For them, and for their teachers, language acquisition is not about what we imagine happens in the mind; instead, it is about developing new communicative practices and what opportunities those practices might afford. If we are researching ways to improve the lived experiences of learners, then we need to define language acquisition in a way that is relevant to them.

Notions of language that separate knowledge from use—Chomsky’s competence and performance, for example—were designed so that language could be studied in the abstract, and perhaps are useful paradigms for some types of linguistic inquiry. But second language acquisition is not abstract; it is situated in real, often heteroglossic, neighborhoods and classrooms and dependent on varied and diverse input. The way it unfolds, the language that learners produce, that performance that gets abstracted away in those traditional models, is precisely what matters because it has material consequences, affecting learners’ relationships and job prospects and everything in between. If researchers want to extend their claims into the practical realm and make recommendations on pedagogical practices for diverse learners, including adult immigrants, they cannot continue

to rely on theoretical models that are inappropriate for these contexts. Instead, research should be imagining new ways of conceptualizing second language acquisition, asking what kind of language development is helpful for learners and how it can be measured.

The target forms in these studies are also problematic. Many of the forms designated as targets—such as “third person -s” in English, for example—are iconic features of the so-called Standard varieties of the “languages” in question. This process not only reifies Standard languages, but it also perpetuates the pathologization of the language practices of racialized and otherwise marginalized communities, the communities that many adult immigrant students are part of (Rosa, 2016). Are these “Standard” features really what learners want and need to learn? And do they lead to material improvements for learners?

Asking these sorts of questions is important because we know that adapting or adding to a student’s linguistic practices—a supremely difficult task in and of itself—is not enough to change how they are heard and what opportunities they are afforded. Many working-class adult immigrants, especially those who are racialized as nonwhite, will face discrimination regardless of the language they produce, and so we cannot assume that linguistic assimilation is a particularly beneficial or even achievable goal (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Adult immigrant learners’ experiences, including their continued marginalization, must be centered and their social positioning acknowledged before relevant research questions can be developed.

Going Forward

Clearly, there is much room for improvement in future work, but how does it happen? Most important, quantitative and experimental researchers need to practice increased reflexivity. This means critically examining the assumptions underlying their work and the consequences of these assumptions for the interpretation and applicability of results.

In this vein, SLA researchers should also embrace interdisciplinarity and draw from the rich body of language research outside of structural linguistics. For example, ethnographic approaches could offer insight into the actual language practices of adult immigrants (and how they might differ from the idealized “standard”), which in turn could inform the development of more holistic evaluation metrics and a more nuanced understanding of learners’ own targets.

Of course, I am not the first to advocate for these sorts of changes. For example, Lourdes Ortega, co-author of one of the meta-analyses reviewed above, has consistently challenged her colleagues to move beyond the traditional assumptions of SLA (Ortega, 2018). Similarly, the Douglas Fir Group has called for a transdisciplinary approach to research on multilingualism, which disrupts static paradigms (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). And yet, most quantitative SLA research, particularly work done in the generative tradition, continues to recycle problematic conceptions of language and relies on overly simplistic research models. To move past these limited and restricted frameworks, we must keep pushing for new work that gives us usable insights into language learning and disrupts existing systems (epistemological and otherwise) of oppression.

But what happens in the meantime? Teachers have students who want to learn now and so must make decisions about pedagogical approaches and instructional practices. As the empirical evidence is just not yet clear—and might not ever be—applied linguists and teacher educators must encourage teachers to practice criticality when making these decisions. As I have argued, however, the claims of academic research cannot be taken at face value. Instead, teachers should be emboldened to draw from alternative traditions and produce their own epistemological shift.

Ultimately, teachers, like researchers, must be reflective about their assumptions relating to language and language learning. What are they imagining as the target, and why? How might they be misconstruing their students’ language practices as deficient—or perpetuating linguistic and structural inequality? And how could they foster a more dynamic and just approach to language, in the classroom and beyond? These are the questions that all of us working in SLA should be asking, and that bring the idea of “second language acquisition” closer to lived experience and therefore more relevant, engaging, and potentially transformative.

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