

The Case for Teaching Morphosyntax and Principles for Doing So

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Researchers in the field of second language acquisition have made the study of morphosyntax one of their top priorities over the past four decades. In this paper we first look at six lines of SLA research that converge on the same conclusion: Most postpuberty learners have difficulty acquiring L2 morphosyntax and without an explicit focus on acquiring it, little acquisition will likely take place. The six lines of research are the sensitive period, L1 interference, the complexity of morphosyntax, the lack of salience of many morphosyntactic forms, studies conducted in naturalistic contexts, and studies conducted in classroom contexts. In the second part of the paper, we discuss seven principles for teaching morphosyntax that are placed into three categories: explicit form-focused instruction, communicative input, and communicative output. Ideally, these principles should be combined in an educational curriculum so that they are mutually reinforcing.

第二言語習得研究において半世紀近く重要視されてきた分野のひとつは形態統語研究分野である。この論文では、はじめに、思春期以降の学習者の第二言語の形態統語習得は困難であり、それらに明示的に重点をおかずに習得をすることは稀なことである、という結論へと収束する6つの系列分野の研究の結果を検討していく。その分野とは、敏感期、第一言語干渉、形態統語の複雑性、多くの形態統語における卓越性の欠如、自然的環境下における第二言語学習、そしてクラスルームにおける第二言語学習である。次に、明示的言語重視の指導、コミュニケーションによるインプット、コミュニケーションによるアウトプットの3分野に分類された7つの形態統語教育原理を考察する。これらの原理は、カリキュラムの中で組み合わせられ、相互に強調されることが理想的である。

The acquisition of morphosyntax¹ has long been one of the main foci of SLA researchers in part because many morphosyntactic forms have proven difficult for second language learners to acquire. The first section of this paper concerns the case for teaching morphosyntax. In this section, we consider six lines of evidence that support the need for explicit morphosyntactic instruction. In the second section, we discuss seven principles for teaching morphosyntax. Ideally, these principles should be combined in an educational curriculum so that they are mutually reinforcing.

The Case for Teaching Morphosyntax

The six lines of research briefly reviewed below converge on the same conclusion: Most adult L2 learners acquire little morphosyntax even when using the target language communicatively over long periods of time; thus, explicit instruction and/or explicit study are needed if learners are to acquire even moderately high levels of morphosyntactic accuracy and complexity. These six lines of research are the sensitive period, L1 interference, the complexity of morphosyntax, the lack of salience of many morphosyntactic forms, studies conducted in naturalistic contexts, and studies conducted in classroom contexts.

The Sensitive Period

Language learners generally reach a high level of morphosyntactic proficiency if they receive extensive exposure to a language before puberty, while late exposure to the second language generally results in considerably lower levels of proficiency (DeKeyser, 2012). This finding is unsurprising given that brain researchers have shown that age of acquisition influences cognitive processing in humans. For instance, Weber-Fox and Neville's (2001) measurement of event-related brain potentials indicated that individuals immersed in English before age 7 performed significantly better than those immersed after age 7 in terms of their auditory comprehension of English syntax. The researchers

concluded that “the processes more closely related to grammatical functions are more sensitive to delays in second-language immersion” (p. 1350). Furthermore, an fMRI study conducted by Lidzba, Schwilling, Grodd, Krageloh-Mann, and Wilke (2011) showed age-related differences for both language comprehension and production. Thus, brain research indicates that postpuberty foreign language learners inevitably encounter difficulty accurately acquiring some morphosyntactic forms.

First Language Interference

Second language acquisition occurs more rapidly when the L1 and L2 are relatively similar (Ard & Homburg, 1992). Conversely, as languages become increasingly different from one another, acquisition occurs more slowly. Luk and Shirai (2009) found that native speakers of Japanese, Korean, and Chinese, whose native languages rarely mark plurality on nouns, acquired plural *-s* later than native speakers of Spanish, whose native language marks plurality. More recently, Murakami and Alexopoulou (2016) found further evidence for the influence of learners’ native language on L2 acquisition when they investigated six English grammatical morphemes with seven L1 groups at five levels of English proficiency. Overall, L2 morphemes with analogous forms in the L1 were acquired more accurately than those that are absent in the L1. Morphemes that encode universal cognitive concepts (e.g., plurality) were easier to acquire than morphemes that encode language-specific concepts (e.g., the progressive aspect in English); thus, acquiring a new concept is more difficult than acquiring a new form for a well-known concept. In sum, current evidence indicates that L1 morphosyntax sometimes makes the acquisition of L2 morphosyntax quite challenging.

The Complexity of Morphosyntax

Morphosyntax is complex and its complexity is compounded by the abstractness of many morphosyntactic forms such as articles and prepositions. Complexity takes numerous forms, several of which are described by the four types of transformations that are a part of generative grammar: replacement (e.g., reflexive pronouns), addition (e.g., the *do* auxiliary), deletion (e.g., *by* phrases in passive constructions), and movement (e.g., modals and auxiliaries in yes-no questions). A second example of the complexity of English syntax concerns so-called long-distance dependencies, such as the *not...yet* form, as in: *Michelle has not gone to the store to get the ice cream yet*. The intervening words between *not* and *yet* increase the difficulty of acquiring this syntactic form because they place a heavy load on learners’ working memory. When working memory limitations

and accompanying attentional constraints meet the inherent complexity of human languages, the inevitable result is learning difficulty.

The Lack of Salience of Many Morphosyntactic Forms

Some morphosyntactic forms lack salience; therefore, they can go unnoticed by L2 learners, and forms that are not noticed or noticed rarely are generally difficult to acquire. For instance, function words such as prepositions are more difficult for learners to notice than content words because they are often one-syllable words that rarely receive stress and that carry relatively little semantic weight. Field (2008) reported that learners with different first languages and at different levels of English proficiency had considerably more difficulty accurately processing function words than content words. In addition, morpheme acquisition studies have shown a somewhat predictable order for the acquisition of a group of morphemes (e.g., regular past *-ed* and progressive *-ing*), some of which are notoriously difficult for L2 learners to acquire. Goldschneider and DeKeyser (2001) found that a small number of factors, including frequency and phonological salience, accounted for the acquisition order quite well. The researchers concluded that all of the factors were “aspects of salience in a broad sense of the word” and that “salience . . . facilitates the process of induction of grammatical structure” (p. 37). In sum, the lack of salience of function words and inflectional morphology contributes to their difficulty.

Studies Conducted in Naturalistic Contexts

Learners who rely exclusively on immersion in the target language context frequently fare poorly where acquiring morphosyntax is concerned. Schmidt’s (1983) study of Wes illustrated the severe limitations of naturalistic SLA with a highly communicative L2 learner in an ESL setting in Hawai’i. Even though Wes ran a successful business, processed large amounts of naturalistic input, and regularly interacted with native English speakers, he showed almost no morphosyntactic development over a 3-year period. Klein and Perdue (1997) provided an even stronger basis for concluding that the acquisition of morphosyntax is difficult in naturalistic contexts. Their participants were 40 adult native speakers of six L1s learning different L2s. Although the learners used the L2 in everyday communication for 2.5 years, approximately one third of them acquired what was called the Basic Variety in which there was little use of morphology or subordination, no use of inflections, complex syntactic structures, or syntactic movement, and no grammatical marking of tense and aspect. This study provided

evidence that learners immersed in an L2 context often prioritize meaning over linguistic form and communicate primarily via lexical manipulations. In this way, they short-circuit the acquisition of morphosyntax.

Studies Conducted in Classroom Contexts

The results reported above for naturalistic contexts also apply to foreign language classroom contexts in which instruction of target language morphosyntax is not provided. Swain (1985) and her colleagues reported that even young adults and young learners who entered a Canadian bilingual immersion program in elementary school and who processed communicative input for many years produced numerous grammatically inaccurate utterances when speaking and writing English. In addition, the use of a strong version of communicative language teaching (CLT) in which there is an exclusive focus on meaning via communicative tasks and no explicit teaching of linguistic form can result in a lack of acquisition of certain morphosyntactic forms and the stabilization of nontarget forms (Howatt, 1986; Spada, 2007). Moreover, over two decades of task-based research has shown that morphosyntactic accuracy is unlikely to develop through a task-based approach that does not include an explicit focus on form. For instance, in a review of the effects of three types of pretask planning, Ellis (2009) reported that morphosyntactic accuracy improves less than oral fluency and syntactic complexity when rehearsal (i.e., task repetition) or strategic planning (i.e., planning the content to express and language used to express that content) are part of the task sequence.

Principles for Teaching Morphosyntax

As shown above, a number of different strands of SLA research converge on the conclusion that when L2 learners are in naturalistic and/or classroom contexts in which the overwhelming focus is on meaning and there is little or no focus on teaching morphosyntax, its acquisition is slow or nonexistent. In contrast to these findings, a large body of SLA research has shown that morphosyntax can be taught successfully (e.g., Goo, Granena, Yilmaz, & Novella, 2015; Spada & Tomita, 2010); therefore, its instruction should be part of every foreign language curriculum (Nation, 2007).

The following seven principles for teaching morphosyntax are divided into three sections: explicit form-focused instruction, communicative input, and communicative output. Although four of the following principles concern explicit form-focused instruction, which often involves the temporary decontextualization of morphosyntactic forms, it is important to recognize that instruction of morphosyntax—like the

instruction of vocabulary and the sound system—must be viewed as a support skill for the four major skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Explicit Form-Focused Instruction

Principle 1: Teach Morphosyntax Explicitly

Explicit explanations of morphosyntactic rules should be provided to learners because they have been repeatedly shown to be efficacious (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Spada & Tomita, 2010). Many morphosyntactic rules must be explained repeatedly over time and exemplified with numerous contextualized examples because partial acquisition of a form is the norm. Explicit instruction can be isolated or integrated (Spada & Lightbown, 2008; Spada, Jessop, Tomita, Suzuki, & Valeo, 2014). In isolated form-focused instruction, the target form is temporarily decontextualized; this allows learners to maximize noticing of the form. In integrated form-focused instruction, the form is placed in a meaningful context. For instance, if learners are practicing comparing and contrasting two famous singers, they might first engage in an isolated form-focused task by producing individual sentences that contain one or more of the target forms (e.g., *adjective + -er . . . than; Singer A has a higher voice than singer B*). This task could be followed by an integrated form-focused task in which learners make a presentation comparing and contrasting the two singers. The learners' primary focus should be on meaningful communication, but they would also be pressured to use target morphosyntactic forms in the presentation. This approach to morphosyntactic instruction is closely aligned with the principles of skill-acquisition theory (DeKeyser, 2015) and deliberate practice (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993).

Principle 2: Provide Explicit Corrective Feedback

Corrective feedback should generally be focused on explicitly stated morphosyntactic objectives in tasks in which morphosyntactic accuracy is expected. Corrective feedback is useful because it makes target forms more salient, places pressure on students to process and/or produce the target forms accurately, and informs learners about areas of success and (partial) failure. However, some types of corrective feedback are more efficacious than others. First, focused feedback on specific morphosyntactic objectives is more valuable than unfocused feedback on all errors produced by the learners (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2010). Second, explicit types of corrective feedback such as prompts are more effective than implicit types of feedback such as recasts (e.g., Lyster & Saito, 2010) because as the feedback becomes more implicit, the possibility of learners not

recognizing it as corrective feedback increases. Third, the feedback should indicate the presence of the error but not provide the correct form because in this way the students must reflect on the error and produce the correct form themselves (Lalande, 1982). The second and third points are exemplified in the use of teacher prompts. For instance, if a student says, “I goed to Kyoto,” the teacher might respond with “Goed? Past tense” and then allow the student to make the correction. Finally, given that morphosyntax is acquired gradually, corrective feedback should be provided as needed over an extended period of time.

Principle 3: Encourage Learners to Actively Think About Morphosyntax

Deductive instruction (i.e., the explanation of a rule followed by practice) is arguably the best way to introduce new morphosyntactic forms to L2 learners, particularly when they are at lower proficiency levels. However, there are potential benefits to inductive approaches in which learners must analyze the target language and produce the rule(s) themselves. The primary advantage to inductive approaches is that they place the responsibility for thinking about morphosyntax on the learners; however, teachers should generally provide learners with guidance in the form of corrective feedback and guiding questions as they engage in inductive tasks. Two examples of guided inductive teaching are Socratic questioning (Koshi, 1996) and guided inductive teaching (Vogel, Herron, Cole, & York, 2011). Koshi defined Socratic questions as “higher order, critical-thinking questions on selected grammatical structures, the answers to which help learners inductively find the grammatical codes of the operating system of the language as used in the discourse-level text” (p. 407). For example, after completing prereading tasks and confirming that the students have good comprehension of a reading passage, the instructor can focus the students’ attention on the verb tenses embedded in the reading passage by asking questions such as *Why is the present perfect verb tense used in line 3 of the passage? What is the author communicating through the use of this tense? Can the simple past tense form be used instead of present perfect in this sentence? If no, why not? If yes, how does the meaning change?* Students can work in pairs or small groups and consult with grammar books when answering such questions.

Principle 4: Encourage Learners to Relate Target Forms to One Another

This principle, which is a pillar of generative learning theory (Wittrock, 1992), is used with morphosyntactic forms that are related to one another. One example of related

forms is verb tenses, which are united by their function of indicating not only when various activities and states occur, but also when they occur in relation to one another. For instance, assuming that students have a reasonably good understanding of simple past, past progressive, and past perfect, the next step in their acquisition is to help them better understand how these three verb tenses work in conjunction with each other. This can be done with reading passages in which the three verb tenses are present. Understanding how verb tenses work together is difficult to acquire by processing communicative input because of the complexity of those relationships, the rarity of certain combinations, and the memory load involved in processing verb tenses in communicative contexts. However, instructors can support students’ attempts to learn about these relationships by providing explicit instruction, input enhancement (i.e., making linguistic forms in the input more salient through bolding, underlining, etc.), and salient examples and by encouraging the students to produce combinations of these verb tenses in speaking and writing tasks.

Communicative Input

Principle 5: Large Amounts of Comprehensible Input Are Provided

Comprehensible input serves three functions where teaching morphosyntax is concerned. First and foremost, it is the best way to provide L2 learners with positive evidence about how the target language works (Gass & Mackey, 2015). Although there is no convincing body of evidence that processing communicative input leads to significant learning of new morphosyntactic forms (e.g., Klein & Purdue, 1997; Schmidt, 1983), input processing likely serves a consolidation function in which learners proceduralize and eventually automatize the morphosyntactic forms they process repeatedly in different contexts (DeKeyser, 2015). Second, the provision of comprehensible input helps learners become able to comprehend the communicative function(s) of morphosyntactic forms in meaningful contexts. One way to approach this goal is to have learners regularly engage in extensive reading and extensive listening tasks. Third, reading and listening texts can provide a good basis for selecting which morphosyntactic forms to teach. For instance, morphosyntactic goals can be based on the presence of particular morphosyntactic forms embedded in texts (DeKeyser, 2015). In this way, the explicit teaching of morphosyntax is strongly connected to and reinforced by the morphosyntactic forms the learners encounter in the input.

Communicative Output

Principle 6: Learners Produce Target Morphosyntax in Speaking and Writing Tasks

Having learners use target morphosyntax productively provides two main benefits. First, productive processing is generally more cognitively demanding than receptive processing; this characteristic of production is widely viewed as desirable because it leads to greater long-term learning (Bjork, Dunlosky, & Kornell, 2012). Learners can be instructed to use appropriate morphosyntactic forms in productive tasks, such as in small group discussions and in written assignments. Second, unlike receptive processing, output tasks provide instructors with a “window” into the learners’ minds and specifically in regards to their understanding of target morphosyntactic forms. Based on this understanding, instructors can provide personalized corrective feedback. This second benefit is also related to the positive learning cycle used in many fields: Gaps in knowledge and partial understandings are identified, they are turned into learning objectives, and work is done to achieve those objectives. This approach eventually leads to more competent productive performances.

Principle 7: Learners Personalize Their Use of Morphosyntax

Learning any skill ultimately requires that each learner comes to “own” their knowledge by creating a cognitive network that guides their receptive and productive processing. When learners autonomously produce target morphosyntax, they must make decisions regarding when and how to use the morphosyntax in communicative contexts (see Cooke, 2012, for an example), which is exactly the skill needed in real-world interactions. As learners autonomously use the target forms, they naturally relate them to their network of linguistic knowledge; learners must develop a highly interconnected network of knowledge if they are to use the target forms skillfully and fluently (Wittrock, 1992). A final advantage of providing autonomy is that it can be motivating for learners (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy can be provided in numerous ways. For instance, in a speaking or writing course, learners can be taught ways to achieve greater syntactic complexity (e.g., the use of coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions, adverbial phrases, or prepositional phrases); the learners can then autonomously select and use one or more of those ways until they gain facility with them.

Conclusion

Research has shown that instructors and learners should not assume that the acquisition of morphosyntax will take place “naturally.” If learners are to make satisfactory progress, morphosyntax must be taught explicitly. We have recommended that a three-part, multifaceted approach made up of explicit form-focused instruction, communicative input, and communicative output be used. While no pedagogical approach can guarantee acquisition, we believe that the use of this multifaceted approach can increase the probability that learners will be more successful where the complex task of morphosyntactic acquisition is concerned.

Notes

1. We prefer the term *morphosyntax* to the term *grammar* because it better highlights the fact that grammar is traditionally composed of two main parts: morphology and syntax (i.e., word order).

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