

# Second Language Syntax Acquisition

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**SECOND LANGUAGE SYNTAX ACQUISITION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the acquisition of syntactic properties in a second language. To understand how syntactic properties are acquired, a theoretical approach of Universal Grammar is presented, with an emphasis on the application of the Universal Grammar approach to second language acquisition. Acquisition of the following syntactic properties is being described: acquisition of morphemes, acquisition of negation and verb movement, acquisition of word order, acquisition of questions and acquisition of relative clauses. Second language teaching and learning in classroom settings is an important issue regarding second language acquisition. In this paper, some basic principles of teaching and learning a second language are outlined with connection to first language teaching.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Learning how to form phrases and then turn them into sentences is an important part of language acquisition and these combinatorial properties of language are known as syntax of a language. Syntax of a native language is acquired by most of the children by the time they start school, but second language syntax is affected by some factors such as the age factor and the stage of development when second language learning begins.

When it comes to second language syntax acquisition research, there are two areas in which research is conducted. The first area involves explaining how and why some syntactic properties are developed earlier than others and why some remain problematic and difficult even for advanced learners. The underlying assumption is that learners build mental grammars in which representations of some syntactic properties are established earlier than others. The second involves explaining what kind of mechanisms brains of second language learners use to create these mental grammars.

There are several approaches to second language acquisition, but in this paper Chomsky's Universal Grammar will be briefly presented with the emphasis on Principles and Parameters theory developed within it, that will help us understand the syntax acquisition process more clearly.

In this paper, research that was carried out on second language syntax acquisition will be looked at, starting from the acquisition of morphemes, acquisition of negation and verb movement, acquisition of word order, acquisition of questions and acquisition of relative clauses.

When learning second language, it is acquired differently in classroom settings and in naturalistic settings. As language instruction is very important when second language is acquired in the classroom, some basic principles of instructing and teaching second language in general, as well as syntax, will be outlined in the last chapter of this paper.

## 2. THEORETICAL APPROACH: UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR

Generative acquisition researchers assume that there is an innate mechanism of language acquisition – Universal Grammar. The theory of Universal Grammar, developed by Chomsky (1995) postulates that humans are born with the universal principles of grammar and thus a child is able to acquire any natural human language. Since grammar of any language is complex, but at the same time it is acquired by a child without any effort, Chomsky concluded that there has to be an innate mechanism that is guiding the child through the principles of a language he/she is exposed to.

As said by Chomsky (1995; cited in Eisenbess, 2015), Universal Grammar has predispositions for grammatical categorization as well as formal universals i.e. well formed constraints for syntactic representations that are applied to all human languages. One such formal universal is the Structure-Dependency Principle. “It states that all syntactic operations are dependent on syntactic structure, not on linear order or other non-structural aspects of language.” (Eisenbess; 2015:1799). Following this principle, children who are given a pair of sentences like: *The cat is sleeping.* and *Is the cat sleeping?* should not assume that questions are formed by fronting the first auxiliary or the third word of the sentence. All syntactic operations should affect elements that belong to a particular syntactic category, in this case English question formation.

As already stated, grammars of all natural human languages are built on the same pattern with Universal Grammar underlying the particular grammars of specific languages. However, Universal Grammar allows for a variation between languages, but only in a limited and a specific way. This approach became known as the 'principles and parameters' approach, and the basic idea underlying it is that principles are invariants of human language while cross-linguistic variations are the parameters. They are connected with the biological characteristics of human brain, operating within the course of child development, but in a different way: principles operate very much the same in every child, while parameters are dependent on the child's linguistic input (Snyder and Lillo-Martin, 2011).

Initially, parameters referred to a heterogeneous set of linguistic properties such as subject omissions, word order or morphological marking. However, parameters got re-conceptualized and in recent generative models they are linked to properties of functional categories that are carrying grammatical features and are realized by function words or grammatical morphemes.

“For instance, subject-verb-agreement markers that are associated with subject realization parameters are viewed as realizations of the functional category INFL(lection), which projects to an Inflectional Phrase (IP). Complementizers, whose properties are crucial for extractions from embedded clauses, are treated as realizations of the functional category COMP(lementizer), which projects to a complementizer phrase (CP), and determiners, which show cross-linguistic differences in definiteness and specificity marking, are viewed as realizations of the functional category DET(erminer), the head of the DP.” (Eissenbess, 2011:1800)

According to that, children built projections of functional categories by learning the properties of lexical elements that encode these categories.

The application of the Universal Grammar theory in second language acquisition has been the subject of debate among researchers. In comparison with first language acquisition, second language acquisition rarely results in native-like proficiency, and fossilization – a period where permanent errors occur – is a common occurrence, especially in adult second language acquisition. Awadajin Finney (2005) said errors may be the result of second language acquisition if learners choose to ignore variations between languages and apply the same principles in first language and second language acquisition. In second language acquisition learner has to become aware of these variations and make adjustments, which is not always simple because, for example, an adult second language learner will already have an internalised first language grammar with parameters set at values for the first language.

### **3. SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF GRAMMATICAL MORPHOLOGY**

The development of syntactic knowledge is best viewed as a consequence of learners building mental grammars and grammar-building is possible because of Principles and Parameters of Universal Grammar. The research strategies consist of collecting observations from second language learners to see patterns of syntactic development and they are referred to as descriptive generalizations.

In this chapter, evidence concerning the acquisition of grammatical morphemes in English as a second language learners and then descriptive generalizations will be made. Before looking at the acquisition of grammatical morphemes, it is necessary to define that concept.

Let us look at examples 1a and 1b first:

1a Joanna rarely thinks about her dreams.

1b Joanna rare-*ly* think-*s* about her dream-*s*.

Although the sentence in 1a consists of six words, it also consists of eight syntactically relevant items, as it can be seen in 1b. The *-s* attached to *think* is a subject-verb agreement and tense/aspect marker. The *-s* attached to *dream* is a plural marker whilst the *-ly* attached to *rare* changes the word category – from an adjective to an adverb. These eight items in 1b are therefore the minimal syntactically relevant items of language and they are known as morphemes, as defined by Hawkins (2001).

Morphemes are abstract entities of spoken and written forms. Take into account these three sentences:

2a Joanna rarely think-*s* about her dreams.

b Joanna yell-*s* on her children.

c Joanna wish-*es* she is younger.

All of the sentences above, the *-s/-es* inflections, realize the same morpheme, i.e. 3<sup>rd</sup> person agreement marker and tense/aspect marker. But in written form this morpheme is realized in two ways: *-s* and *-es*. Furthermore, in spoken form these three are phonetically distinct forms. These written or spoken realizations of the same morpheme are referred to as the allomorphs.

Many studies have been conducted to see how children acquire grammatical morphemes in their first language. Widiatmoko (2008) describes a study by Roger Brown (1973) on how three children acquire fourteen morphemes in their first language. The data collected showed that they acquire morphemes in a sequence, i.e. there is an order of acquisition.

The first studies of second language development were actually studies of the acquisition of grammatical morphemes. As described in Hawkins (2001), in 1973 and 1974 Dulay and Burt used a procedure called Bilingual Syntax Measure to produce samples of speech from second language speakers. The Bilingual Syntax Measure consisted of series of cartoons and a question associated with each cartoon. For example, there was a picture of a fat



cartoon character and a question related to it: “*Why is he so fat?*”. The subjects in the 1973 study consisted of three groups of five-to-eight-year old Spanish speakers in the United States. One group consisted of Puerto Rican children who lived in the U.S. for a year or less and were exposed to English in school, but had no formal instruction in it. The second group consisted of children from Sacramento born in the U.S. and they were taught in English and had ESL classes. The third group consisted of Mexican children from Tijuana who crossed to border to attend an English school, but returned home every day. The data was analysed by looking for eight English grammatical morphemes: present progressive (*-ing*), plural (*-s*), irregular past, possessive (NPs), 3rd person singular present indicative (*-s*), article (*a, the*), contractible copula (*be*) and contractible auxiliary (*be – V+ing*). To do that, they determined 'obligatory occasions', i.e. points in sentences that require a grammatical morpheme in native speaker speech. For example, in *He is holding a stick* the obligatory occasions for grammatical morphemes are *he, is, -ing* and *a*. If a second language speaker failed to realize these morphemes, the sentence *hold stick* would be the result. The most striking finding from this study was that within each group, subjects were most accurate and least accurate on the same morphemes. All three groups were most accurate in supplying the progressive *-ing* morpheme and least accurate on possessive *-s* and 3rd person singular *-s*. Also, the subjects were less accurate in providing auxiliary *be*. A conclusion that could be drawn from that study is that some morphemes in English are more difficult for children as second language learners to acquire than others, but this difficulty is obviously not affected by the length of exposure, but by the type of exposure: the second group was exposed to English both as a medium of instruction and in ESL classes, while the other two groups were only exposed to English as a medium of instruction.

To broaden the findings, in 1974 Dulay and Burt repeated the study, but this time with second language Spanish speakers and second language Cantonese (Chinese) speakers. The procedure was the same, but this time three more morphemes were taken into consideration: the regular past tense marker *-ed*, pronoun case and syllabic plural. Although Spanish speakers achieved better results than Cantonese, the accuracy profiles were similar.

The subjects in both studies had been exposed to English as a naturalistic input because they lived in the U.S. The question remained whether second language learners who have received formal exposure to English could achieve the same accuracy. Makino (1980; cited in Hawkins, 2001) used a similar procedure as Bilingual Syntax Measure. Makino examined the performance of Japanese students who were divided into two groups: those who

had received two years of classroom instruction in English and those who had received three years of classroom instruction. The results showed similarities in accuracy where progressive *-ing* and plural *-s* were among most accurate morphemes, just like in Dulay and Burt's study. However, Dulay and Burt's subjects were more accurate on copula *be*, whereas Makino's subjects were more accurate on possessive *-s* which could indicate selective influence of the first language on the subjects' performance.

Hawkins took into consideration acquisition of morphemes by adults so he described Bailey's study (1974). Bailey wanted to see the acquisition of morphemes in adult second language speakers and he also used the Bilingual Syntax Measure. He tested 73 subjects aged from 17 to 55, where 30 of them were Spanish and others spoke different languages. The results showed differences in the accuracy profiles of the Spanish speakers and the non-Spanish ones, but also some strong similarities. The most accurate were progressive *-ing*, contractible copula and plural *-s*, while possessive *-s* and 3rd person singular *-s* are the least accurate. Spanish speakers did better on articles, but their performance on irregular past tense verb forms was less accurate than of non-Spanish speakers.

To conclude, these early studies have shown that not that many factors have influence in determining which morphemes in English are easy and which are difficult for second language speakers to acquire. Second language speakers of different ages and from different first language backgrounds, who are learning English under different circumstances and with different input, have similar accuracy profiles on Bilingual Syntax Measure tests. However, almost all research on grammatical morpheme acquisition has been done on learners of English and these studies have very little relevance for languages that comprise very few morphological components.

#### **4. SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF NEGATION AND VERB MOVEMENT**

In previous chapter we looked at research carried out in the field of second language morphology acquisition and the results have shown that age and first language background have an influence on the acquisition process. Also, the idea that syntactic development in second language acquisition is a consequence of building mental grammars was explored. In this chapter, descriptive generalizations for the acquisition of negation and verb movement will be covered.

There are three types of syntactically expressed negation in English. The first is sentential negation.

1 Mark didn't go to the party on Saturday.

The negative force of *n't*, i.e. *not* can range over the sentence so that it means *It wasn't the case that Mark went to the party on Saturday*, but it can also range over the constituent *party* and thus interpretation is *It wasn't the party where Mark went on Saturday* ('he went somewhere else'). This range is referred to as the scope. Scope is not restricted to a single constituent, e.g. *not* can have scope over the constituent *on Saturday*.

2 Mark went to the party, but not on Saturday.

Negation has another form as well – *no* – which can be used as a negative determiner or as a negative response to questions which is called anaphoric negation:

3 Will you go to the party?

No.

Second language learners of English tend to acquire sentential negation systematically, as it has been known for a while now. Cancino et. al. (1978; cited in Hawkins, 2001) collected data from six Spanish-speaking learners of English and then formulated an early proposal for a descriptive generalization. They suggested four stages in development. In the first stage, the type of negation that occurs is *no* + verb e.g. *I no can see*. In the second stage, they would use *no/don't* (unanalysed) + verb e.g. *He no like it./He don't like it*. Unanalysed *don't* here refers to an item with no internal structure i.e. there are no differences for *don't*, *doesn't*, *didn't* for the speaker, they all have the same intended meaning. In the third stage, the type of negation they would produce is copula/auxiliary + *no/not* e.g. *It's not danger*. or *He can't see*. In the final, fourth, stage the learners produce *don't* (analysed) + verb, e.g. *I didn't even know*. Their study contributed to realization that second language learners of English become accurate on the copula *be* before they become accurate on the auxiliary *be* in progressive aspect, but also some information about how these syntactic distinctions interact with the development of sentential negation.

Hawkins (2001) considered a study by Shapira (1976), where the author studied the development of sentential negation in a 22-year-old Spanish speaker from Guatemala living in the U.S. She collected three samples of spontaneous speech: one after the subject arrived,

second after 6 months and the third after 11 months. There was a specific pattern of development, where two things should be noted. First, the subject seems to be at an elementary level of development even at the third stage, i.e. sampling. There is a predominant use of *no* as the sentential negation throughout and *don't* appears only at the third sampling, which appears in the first two stages of development according to Cancino et al. (1976;cited in Hawkins, 2001). However, in Spanish *no* is a sentential negator so this might be the first language influence. Second, Spanish has a copula verb similar to English in adjective constructions, e.g. *El agua no esbuena*. ('The water isn't good.'). The absence of the pattern *no + be* is an indicator of first language influence on determining phonological form of the negator in English as a second language.

To gain a clearer picture of this, data were collected from speakers of typologically different languages. Stauble (1984;cited in Hawkins, 2001) collected cross-sectional data of second language English speakers. Six of them were Spanish and six were Japanese and they had different proficiency levels: low intermediate, intermediate and advanced. The data show that at the low intermediate level the Spanish speakers display a predominant use of *no + Ø* in copula constructions, use of *no + thematic verb* with some use of unanalyzed *don't*. Surprisingly, the Japanese speakers use *no* as a sentential negator just as much as the Spanish speakers, but this is not likely to be the effect of first language because negation in Japanese is very different from both English and Spanish. This result initiates doubt about whether first language really influences the choice of negation form. At the intermediate level, there is an important correlation between three subjects. The use of *n't* instead of negator *no* has grown, just like the growth of use of copula *be + negator*. Compared to low intermediate subjects, there is an increase in the use of unanalyzed *don't*. At the advanced level, it seems that subjects have acquired the target properties of negation. The *do* is specified for tense and agreement, while the use of unanalysed *don't* is minimal. The use of copula *be + not* is almost target-like.

Hawkins (2001) used these empirical findings to argue that in the initial stages of acquisition of negation, IP is absent and he speculates that a negator gets acquired from anaphoric negation in English and selects VP as its complement. Subsequently, IP is established when learners acquire copula *be*, which moves from IP to I. The author suggested that the acquisition of I facilitates the acquisition of *not* and triggers the growth in the use of unanalysed *don't*. However, to argue this case, the syntax of sentential negation and what kind

of syntactic knowledge second language learners acquire when they acquire negation, needs to be taken into account.

## 5. SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF WORD ORDER

In this chapter, the acquisition of word order in languages by second language learners will be closely examined. “Word order is the result of the interplay between the projection of structure from particular categories, as determined by X theory and the future specifications of particular functional heads like I, and so it is a fruitful area in which to consider grammar-building.” (Hawkins, 2001:90). It is assumed that each language has its own basic word order from which other orders are derived. Other linguists claim that all languages have the same basic word order and that surface differences between them result from different feature specifications in functional categories. Under this view, Universal Grammar then provides a universal basic order of constituents. To go into further details, word order in German will be studied to see how second language learners acquire properties of word order and what influence the first language has on that development.

In declarative main clauses in German, the word order is similar to English: Subject-Verb-Object, but if the verb is in a simple tense form. Adverbs can appear between thematic verbs and their objects:

1      Johann kaufte heute ein Buch.

John bought today a book.

'John bought a book today.'

If the verb is in a compound form (auxiliary + past participle, with modal verb or with a particle), the finite part of the compound appears at the end of the clause:

2a      Johann hat heute ein Buch gekauft (auxiliary + past participle)

John has today a book bought.

'John bought a book today.'

2b      Johann wird heute ein Buch kaufen. (modal + infinitive)

John will today a book buy.

'John will buy a book today'

2c Johann nahm heute ein Buch auf. (verb + particle)

John picked today a book up.

'John picked up a book today'

If a constituent other than the subject is moved to the front of the clause, the finite part of the verb must be moved into second position thus pushing the subject into third position. This phenomenon is described by Hawkins (2001) as the verb second (V2) effect.

3 Heute hat Johann ein Buch gekauft.

Today has John a book bought.

'Today John has bought a book'

With subordinated clauses, single and compound verb forms must appear at the end and the finite part of the verb needs to be the final element.

4 Sieweisst, dass [Johann heute ein Buch gekauft hat]

She knows that John today a book bought has.

'She knows that John has bought a book today'

Actually, a number of features of the clause determine the location of verbs in German:

1. Whether a verb is finite or non-finite.
2. Whether the clause is a main clause or a subordinate clause.
3. The precedence relations between constituents.

Studies have shown that second language German learners go through stages in acquiring the verb location. Clahen and Muysken (1986;cited in Hawkins 2001) described stages which speakers of Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Turkish go through. With idealization of data, the authors assumed that in acquiring German word order, subjects go through the following stages:

1. An SVO stage

They first produce main clauses like this:

5 Ich studieren in Porto.

'I study in Porto'.

In this stage, they do not place the non-finite verb at the end of the clause and there is no V2 effect, which results in sentences like this:

6 Vielle ich andere Kollege sagen...

'Perhaps other colleague say ...'

## 2. A finite verb/non-finite verb separation stage

In this stage, the subjects start placing non-finite parts of verbs at the end of the clause, but no V2 appears yet.

7 Wir haben drei Feuer gesehen.

We have three fires seen.

'We saw three fires'

Examples such as 6 are still produced in this stage.

## 3. A verb second stage

In the third stage, subjects begin to produce verb second effect – they are placing the finite verb second in the clause when other constituents, other than the subject, appear in the first position in a main clause.

8 Vielleicht wissen viele Leutenicht.

Perhaps know many people not.

'Perhaps many people don't know'

## 4. A verb-final-in-embedded-clauses stage

Before the fourth stage, learners produced sentences with SVO order in embedded clauses:

9 Wann wir fahren hier in Deutschland, drei Feuer gesehen.

When we drive here in Germany, three fires seen.

'When we came back to Germany, we saw three fires'

"In a final stage, subjects distinguish between main and embedded clauses and place finite verb forms at the end of the embedded clauses, as in the target pattern." (Hawkins, 2001:127).

After this, it is easy to arrive at a descriptive generalization: the location of finite and non-finite verb forms in German is acquired systematically, at least by speakers of Romance languages. The pattern of development starts at an early stage of SVO that does not involve verb separation, then it goes to verb separation to verb second, and finally to verb final in embedded clauses. This pattern allows us to think of other orders e.g. where verb final is acquired before verb separation or similar.

## 6. SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF QUESTIONS

In this chapter, the difference between *yes/no* and *wh*-questions will be illustrated and a descriptive generalization about the second language development of questions will be outlined.

There are two main types of question in English. First, *yes/no* questions are formed by moving copula *be*, auxiliary *be/have* or a modal verb to the front of the sentence, as illustrated in 1, and they can be answered simply by *yes* or *no*. They can also be formed by using a tag question at the end of the sentence, as shown in 2.

1 Are you happy?

Can he walk?

Do I know you?

2 You are happy, aren't you?

He can walk, can't he?

I know you, don't I?



Secondly, there are *wh*-questions which are introduced by *wh*-words such as *who*, *what*, *which*, *why*, *how* etc. *Wh*-questions are formed by moving a finite copula, auxiliary or modal to the second position in the clause, as illustrated in 3.

- 3      Why are you happy?  
  
          Why can't he walk?  
  
          How do I know you?  
  
          Which movie did you watch?

As is the case with negation, it has been known that second language learners of English go through stages of development in acquiring questions. Lightbown and Spada (1993; cited in Hawkins, 2001) have proposed the following stages:

1. Rising intonation on words/formulae, e.g. *Four children?*
2. Rising intonation on clauses, e.g. *The boys throw the shoes?*
3. A question word is placed at the front of the clause, but often without a copula or auxiliary, e.g. *Is the picture has two planets on top?*
4. Copula *be* moves to the front in *yes/no* questions, and to second position in *wh*-questions, e.g. *Where is the sun?*
5. Auxiliaries, modals and *do* move to the front or to the second position, e.g. *What is the boy doing?*
6. Non-movement of the copula or auxiliaries in embedded questions is acquired and question tags are acquired as well, e.g. *Can you tell me what date is today?*

Hawkins (2001) briefly commented on the third stage saying that it appears that at this stage learners mark questions by placing a question word (either a *wh*-word or a verb-like element like *do* or *is*) in front of a declarative clause. These question words are often accompanied by the use of another verb in a normal declarative position, e.g. *Is he is happy?*  
*Do you can go?*

## 7. SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF RELATIVE CLAUSES

This chapter describes the structure of relative clauses in English and the difference between relative clause formation in English-type languages and Chinese-type languages. Some studies of second language acquisition of relative clauses are considered.

In English, relative clauses are clauses which are complements to nouns:

- 1 a    The boy who came.
- b    The melons which they bought
- c    John, who works in a bank, is an Oxford graduate.

There are two types of relative clauses: non-restrictive like the one in 1c, where there is a pause separating the complement from a noun and this kind of relative clause serves to provide additional information about the noun. Restrictive relative clauses like in 1a and 1b have no pause, but information they provide is crucial for understanding the clause or sentence.

When structure of English restrictive relative clauses is considered, it can be said that the structure is fairly complex. First of all, the main noun to which the clause is a complement is co-referential with a noun in the complement clause i.e. it refers to the same conceptual entity, but the noun in the complement clause is null English. “These null nouns can be in subject position, direct object position, object of preposition position, they can be object of a comparison or they can be a part of possessive construction.” (Hawkins, 154:2001). Second, the morpheme which connects the head noun and its complement clause can be a *wh*-word, *that* or  $\emptyset$ , as illustrated in 2a-c.

- 2a    The melons which he bought are ripe.
- b    The melons that he bought are ripe.
- c    The melons he bought are ripe.

Third, when the head noun is co-referential with the object of preposition in the complement clause, the preposition can be left out, as illustrated in 3a, or carried along with the *wh*-word, as illustrated in 3b. The latter operation is known as ‘pied-pipping’ (Ross 1967;cited in Hawkins, 2001):

3a The woman who he gave the book to \_\_\_\_\_

b The woman to whom he gave the book \_\_\_\_\_

According to the standard account of the structure of restrictive relative clauses in English, they are Complementizer Phrases (CPs) which means they are complements to the head noun. Formation of relative restrictive clauses involves the movement of *wh*-operator to a Spec-CP position in the embedded clause. In cases where the head noun is linked to the relative clause by *that*, this is the head of the CP and a null operator (Op) is moved to the specifier of CP (example 2b). In cases where there is no overt form linking the head noun and the relative clause, the morpheme realizing C is null and a null operator is moved to the specifier of CP (example 2c). When it comes to preposition stranding, either *wh*-word alone moves or a prepositional phrase containing *wh*-word moves (examples 3a-b).

There have been many studies of second language acquisition of various properties associated with relative clauses in English and other languages. One important property that needs to be considered is the acquisition of movement of *wh*-words/operators to the specifier of CP. According to Hawkins (2001) learners develop a CP layer of structure in their mental grammars where C is realized by morphemes which force non-local syntactic movement to the Spec-CP position. When learners establish predicative C, no movement will be possible because initially functional categories are specified for head-complement relations only. In other words, learners treat relative restrictive clauses in languages like English as if they had a structure of a relative restrictive clause in Chinese, where the head of the clause normally follows its relative clause. The first language influence can be seen at the point when learners begin to refine the specification for C. "Speakers of languages with *wh*-word/operator movement in relative clauses might acquire movement in the L2 more quickly than speakers of language without movement." (Hawkins, 2001:159).

## **8. SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM TEACHING AND LEARNING**

While syntax of one's first language is acquired successfully by the time a child starts school, second language syntax acquisition depends on the age and the stage of development when the second language learning begins. It is widely accepted that there is a critical period for language learning that extends up to puberty, but this period does not ensure the acquisition of a second language, especially if there is insufficient language ambience for

acquisition. Language acquisition is very different before puberty and after puberty, even though there are some exceptional learners who can maintain their linguistic sensitivity throughout their lives.

There is a set of syntactic structures common to all native English language users and, at a more abstract level, common to all natural languages. Hargis (2014) states that syntax cannot be programmed as a set of empty frames without vocabulary; it can be learnt with concrete expression. Some vocabulary occurs as a function of specific syntactic structures. However, mastery of syntactic structures is a prerequisite for vocabulary growth beyond the basic level.

Grammar teaching has for a long time been an issue in second language pedagogy. Although it has been proved that mastery in first language has an impact on second language acquisition, mere exposure to the target language does not guarantee advanced level of language competence (Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak, 2012). When it comes to classroom teaching, grammar, and therefore syntax itself, is a vital part of it. Due to individual characteristics, conflicts, or rather mismatches, which may occur when teaching and learning a foreign language, the learners' results tend to be poor. Lehnert (1983) states that teachers should be aware of cognitive maturity and the influence of experience on the process of language development; therefore, strategies and materials may need to be individualized according to the level of maturity and experience with language. "Teachers must keep in mind that language development proceeds along a course unique to each student." (Lehnert, 1983:212).

A large percentage of classroom teaching is primarily deductive, which means that one starts with rules and principles and then application. Deduction is an efficient way to present content that is already understood, but induction (reasoning that starts from particulars and ends in generalities) is the key for academic success, and as for language competence. Felder and Henriques (1995) propose that the distinction between deduction and induction is related to the distinction between language acquisition and language learning.

"To acquire a language means to pick it up gradually, gaining the ability to communicate with it without necessarily being able to articulate the rules. (...)On the other hand, language learning is a largely conscious process that involves formal exposure to rules of syntax and semantics followed by specific applications of the

rules, with corrective feedback reinforcing correct usage and discouraging incorrect usage., (Felder and Henriques, 1995:26).

A debate in language education arised from the question whether languages can be acquired in classroom or only learned. Felder and Henriques (1995) believe that the key question every language educator is facing is what classrooms conditions and procedures are necessary for language acquisition to happen. The authors answered that question by stating that command of language involves both acquisition, which is an inductive process, and learning, which is a deductive process. The two are not competitive, but complementary, thus an ideal classroom setting would be the one that stimulates and facilitates both inductive and deductive learning processes.

Wagner (2002) briefly presents both the benefits and flaws of inductive and deductive teaching of grammar. The author states that the inductive approach is the best way to teach regular patterns, while deductive approach works best with the irregular ones. „The deductive approach does save time for the teacher and the class; nevertheless, a major drawback is the tedious and technical presentation of grammar that may bore or frustrate the student if he doesn't understand the rules.“ (Wagner, 2002:6). Krashen (1987; cited in Wagner, 2002) argues that both approaches are learning and not acquisition and that with inductive learning, students focus on form and not on meaning because rules are learned consciously, and the student analyzes the structure of the message instead of the message itself.

Opponents of teaching explicit grammar maintain that this method teaches about the language and the language itself, i.e. students learn the linguistics of the language, but not how to communicate using the language. Wagner (2002) states that writing in foreign language is often easier than speaking, for those who have learned grammar explicitly, but teachers often expect them to have excellent speaking skills. Krashen (1987; cited in Wagner, 2002) attributes that to his Monitor and Input Hypotheses which state that students make corrections only when they are aware of them, e.g. in writing, and that students should not be forced to speak until they have feel comfortable to do so, i.e. until they acquire „comprehensible input“.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories are based on the simplicity and frequency of occurrence, but it is not always the case that the simplest linguistic item will be acquired earlier. Wagner (2002) provides an example of an apparently simple rule – the possessive -sin English and supports his argument by bringing up Larsen-Freeman's

study(1991) in which the subjects acquired the possessive-s late. Also, if some grammatical forms occur more often, that does not mean they will be acquired earlier.

Wagner (2002) addresses another aspect of foreign language learning and teaching and that is the hierarchy of difficulty. Two major problems regarding it are underdifferentiation and overdifferentiation. In the case of underdifferentiation, an item that exists in the native language is absent in the target language, e.g. the present tense has three forms in English, but in some languages more forms or fewer forms are used to express present time. On the other hand, overdifferentiation is the case of an item existing in target language, but is missing from the native language. The case of overdifferentiation can be seen within the case system markers for nouns, which is barely existent in English, but in some languages is ample.

Over the decades, various hypotheses and theories, such as the Identity Hypothesis, Interlanguage Theory or the Output Hypothesis, have developed regarding the second language teaching and learning, and even though some of them were not appealing or effective, their impact in the field of second language teaching and learning cannot be denied. Some of them have been a motivation for linguists to undertake research and to form new comprehensive theories of language learning. As Mitchell and Myles (2004; cited in Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak, 2012) state, „(...)although the field of second language learning has been extremely active and productive in recent decades, we have not yet arrived at a unified or comprehensive view as to how second languages are learnt.“

## **9. CONCLUSION**

Learning how to form phrases and combine them into sentences is an important part of knowing and understanding language. It is, therefore, an important field of research within linguistics. Studying how second language learners acquire syntactic properties is, in comparison to the first language acquisition, an interesting topic. Research can be conducted with regards to why some syntactic properties are acquired earlier than others, as well as with regards to what kind of mechanism brain uses to create mental grammars necessary for understanding and acquiring syntactic properties.

One of the basic theoretical approaches underlying second language acquisition is Chomsky's Principles and Parameters theory, which was examined in this paper with relation to second language acquisition. Syntactic knowledge is a consequence of learners building

mental grammars. Application of the Universal Grammar theory in second language acquisition is not always successful and may not result in native-like proficiency. Learners need to be aware of variations between languages so that successful acquisition can happen.

After reviewing research on second language syntax acquisition, some conclusions can be made. When it comes to the acquisition of grammatical morphemes, first language has little influence, as well as the length of exposure to English. However, the type of exposure has some impact. In the development of negation, there is a pattern of sequence, i.e. there are stages through which a second language learner goes through. First language influences determining phonological form of the negator in English as a second language. German word order was examined to see how second language learners acquire properties of word order. It has been proved that second language learners go through stages in acquiring the verb location. A descriptive generalization was made: the location of finite and non-finite verb forms is acquired systematically. Similarly, learners go through stages of development in acquiring questions. Studies on the acquisition of relative clauses have been carried out, and one important finding is that speakers of languages with wh-word movement in relative clauses might acquire movement in the second languages more quickly than speakers of languages without movement.

All of the findings are important for language teaching and learning. How to teach grammar, i.e. syntax has been an issue in second language pedagogy for a long time. Because of the individual characteristics, some mismatches may occur when teaching and learning. Therefore, it is very important to find the most effective way of doing that. When it comes to classroom teaching, both deductive and inductive teaching is employed, but the distinction between the two is related to the distinction between language acquisition and language learning. Basically, acquisition is an inductive process and learning is a deductive process and ideal classroom setting would be the one which facilitates both processes. Many theories have been developed on how to teach second language in the classroom and many more will be developed. Therefore, it is quite hard to agree upon the most effective theory for teaching second language.

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