

Innatism and Second Language Acquisition: Implications for English as a Second Language Instruction

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Method Subject: English as a Second Language

Language as a System

Language is not one skill but a layered system, and each layer carries its own units and rules. Phonology governs the inventory of meaningful sounds and the combinations a language permits; an English speaker rejects the cluster in “ngoma” not from ignorance but because the phonotactics of English disallow initial /ŋ/. Morphology concerns the smallest meaning-bearing units, so that a learner who produces “unhappiness” has manipulated three morphemes. Syntax supplies the hierarchical rules by which words combine into phrases and clauses, semantics assigns meaning, and pragmatics governs use in context — the reason “Can you pass the salt?” functions as a request rather than a question about ability. A learner may control one subsystem while another lags, which is why an English learner with strong conversational fluency can still struggle with academic writing.

First-language development follows a strikingly uniform course. Infants move from cooing and babbling to holophrastic single words near twelve months, two-word combinations around eighteen months, telegraphic speech, and then a rapid expansion of morphology and complex syntax. The most revealing evidence appears in errors. Children who have said “went” correctly begin producing “goed” and “foots” — forms they have never heard from an adult. Overregularization is not imitation breaking down; it is proof that the child has extracted a rule and is applying it productively.

Innatism and the Developmental Process

Innatism holds that this uniformity is possible because humans are biologically endowed for language. Chomsky (1959) argued in his review of Skinner that behaviorist accounts of imitation and reinforcement cannot explain productive novel utterances, and formalized the alternative through Universal Grammar (Chomsky, 1965): an innate architecture of principles common to all human languages, with parameters set by exposure to a particular one. The central argument is the poverty of the stimulus. The input a child receives is finite, degenerate, and provides almost no negative evidence about what is ungrammatical, yet every typically developing child converges on a complex grammar on roughly the same timetable regardless of culture or parenting style.

Read through this lens, development is triggering rather than teaching. Input does not build the grammar; it activates and specifies a system already present. Predictable stages and overregularization errors are precisely what the theory expects, because the child is running an internal acquisition mechanism, not accumulating habits.

First and Second Language Acquisition Compared

Innatist accounts predict genuine similarities. Both first and second language learners pass through developmental sequences that resist reordering by instruction; a learner will not produce third-person -s reliably because a teacher has taught it early. Both construct systematic interlanguage grammars and both produce rule-governed errors rather than random ones.

The decisive difference is outcome. First language acquisition is uniformly successful; second language acquisition is not, and it degrades with age. Johnson and Newport (1989) found that grammaticality judgment performance among Chinese and Korean immigrants declined systematically with age of arrival, a finding widely read as evidence of maturational constraints. Innatists disagree sharply about why. Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) argue for Full Transfer/Full Access: learners begin from the L1 grammar but retain access to Universal Grammar, so restructuring toward the target remains possible. Bley-Vroman (1990) counters with the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis, holding that adults have lost direct access and instead

recruit general problem-solving abilities alongside knowledge of the first language. A second difference the theory does not itself explain is motivation and affect, which matter enormously in adult classrooms and sit largely outside the model.

Aligned Instructional Practice

An extensive reading program is the most direct instructional expression of the theory. Students self-select graded readers at a comfortable level and read widely with minimal comprehension accountability, on the rationale that acquisition requires abundant primary linguistic data for the internal mechanism to work on. Nakanishi (2015) meta-analyzed 34 studies covering 3,942 participants and reported a mean effect of $d = 0.46$ for between-group contrasts and $d = 0.71$ for pre-post gains, concluding that extensive reading belongs in language curricula.

A Total Physical Response sequence honoring a silent period is the second. Students respond physically to spoken commands of increasing complexity before any production is required (Asher, 1969). This aligns with the innatist claim that comprehension drives acquisition and that forcing early output does not accelerate the underlying system. For newcomer English learners it also lowers anxiety, since participation is demonstrated by action rather than speech.

A Tension Worth Naming

Innatism sits uneasily with instruction. If grammar is triggered rather than taught, teaching grammar should matter little — yet Norris and Ortega (2000), synthesizing 49 studies, found that explicit instructional treatments substantially outperformed implicit ones. I take the defensible classroom position to be that rich comprehensible input remains the engine of acquisition, while explicit attention to form accelerates the noticing that feeds it. The theory tells me what to build a course around; it does not license me to ignore the evidence that focused instruction helps.

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