

On the Relevance of Universal Grammar in L2

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Abstract

There is growing evidence that Universal Grammar (UG) is heavily involved in second language acquisition (SLA). However, current research in applied linguistics still explores various issues in interlanguage, particularly the initial state (the representation that learners use to make sense of second language input). That is, do the properties of interlanguage come from UG or the first language (L1)? Does this count as access to UG? Does L1 grammar constitute the initial state? Does UG count as the initial state? In this paper, I will provide evidence from the production of Arab learners of English to support the fact that UG is undoubtedly involved in the development of L2, and to challenge the claim that UG is irrelevant in L2 acquisition. I will outline the evidence put forward in the published literature indicating that universal grammar principles shape the processes of acquiring a second language. More specifically, I will provide evidence from the linguistic behavior of Moroccan learners of English, showing that L2 learners transfer their pre-existing knowledge to the target language, which indicates that they indirectly pick up from UG, a cognitive move that can be considered as an indirect access to UG. However, I by no means claim that our understanding of the nature of UG itself is clear enough in any conclusive way, as more research should be conducted in this connection.

Key words: initial state, interlanguage, parameter-setting, second language acquisition, universal grammar

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