

Variability in L2 Acquisition: Investigating the Role of Formal Features

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Abstract

Following the development of the minimalist program in the 1990's, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers' interest shifted from a focus on functional categories to a focus on formal features which, thereafter, came to be viewed as the 'center of learnability theory'. Subsequently, Chomsky's distinction of feature selection and feature assembly, divided SLA researchers among those who take L2 impairment to result from a failure in the selection of parametrized features, and those who believe that the problem is caused by a failure in feature assembly. The present study examines the validity of the feature (re)-assembly account by providing arguments from the second language acquisition of English by speakers of two varieties of Arabic. In particular, the findings from the comparison of the written samples of two groups of students are argued to support the claim that L2 impairment can be explained by a failure to (re)-assemble features. However, certain problems in L2 acquisition are left unaccounted for, suggesting that more is involved in SLA than just feature selection and feature assembly.

Keywords: Arabic (Bahraini/Tunisian), feature assembly, imperfective vs. present simple, SLA of English syntax

Cite as: Chekili, F. (2016). Variability in L2 Acquisition: Investigating the Role of Formal Features. *Arab World English Journal*, 7(2). DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol7no2.3>