



## Some Food for Thought

### A critical analysis of some very common didactic practices and ill-founded teaching beliefs on the basis of sociolinguistics and state-of-the-art language acquisition theories

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The present article, provocatively called ‘Some Food for Thought’, revolves around some very common misconceptions and ill-founded teaching beliefs that have come to pervade L2 teaching approaches and styles across the board. Based on the fact that the mechanisms and principles at work in both L1 and L2 acquisition are for a large part the same (compare morpheme studies, creative construction, overgeneralisation, simplification strategies etc.), the article aims to show beyond reasonable doubt that the academic style, also called the ‘grammar translation method’ or ‘get it right from the beginning’ by some, is totally counterproductive and detrimental to the learners’ confidence, especially when it comes to developing their speaking skills and fluency.

**KEYWORDS:** natural order of acquisition, morpheme studies, corrective feedback and independent grammar systems, meaningful interaction, implicit/explicit grammar teaching, EFL teaching

### 1. Introduction

Morpheme studies have shown beyond reasonable doubt that L1 and L2 learners go through similar stages of acquisition, utilizing highly individual and independent grammar systems, which, on the whole, are fairly resistant to abstract grammatical input (cf. Brown & Larson Hall, 2012; Lightbown & Spada, 2013.). The use of ‘metalanguage’ on young learners is therefore counterproductive and, in this light, the importance of abstract grammar teaching must be radically reviewed – even at tertiary institutions of education, where the use of ‘metalanguage’ otherwise thoroughly deserves and has, thus, retained its prestigious academic status.

In order to break the vicious circle of trainee teachers being instructed in the academic style and then superimposing the very same strategies on young learners, it is vital that teacher trainers set the right examples and begin to use more interactive approaches in their own seminars and lectures. Whether this is even remotely possible or whether it will remain ‘wishful thinking’ remains to be seen.

The fact is, however, that the 'academic style' still pervades EFL classrooms across Austria, if not Europe as a whole, even though communicative approaches to EFL teaching are definitely on the increase.

Section 2 and subsequent sections, therefore, try to get to the bottom of the problem and find out why this particular teaching style seems to be so reluctant to 'disappear'. As a lot of teaching is based on accepted conventions and long-standing traditions, it is thus a good idea to scrutinize some widely-held teaching beliefs and practices that have stealthily crept into the modern language classroom and challenge them from a more professional, that is, linguistic point of view.

## 2. Some Commonly Held Teaching Beliefs and Practices

The following is a small collection of some well-worn clichés and common stereotypes not only fairly popular with Austrian EFL teachers, but probably also widely accepted and shared by European foreign language teachers, in general. Incidentally, these 'half-truths' have also helped to firmly entrench the academic style in a number of European school systems and are therefore well worth looking at more closely.

As everybody speaks at least one language, a lot of non-specialists often consider themselves 'pseudo' experts – just as everybody who has ever been to school feels absolutely entitled to dispense their wisdom in terms of pedagogy – regularly passing judgement and airing their opinions, even though a great many of these beliefs are quite clearly at odds with what linguists, the true experts in the field, have learnt over years of meticulous and painstaking research and study. If the 'better' part of the population believe that, for example, women talk more than men or some languages do not have grammar, then this may reflect those people's low opinion about the 'weaker sex' or certain languages (often African), but otherwise does not have a very serious effect on how languages or foreign languages are generally taught in educational settings (Bauer & Trudgill, 1998). However, if a great many of these beliefs, especially the ones that are immediately relevant to language teaching, are also held by the specialists, the language teachers, as it were, things are beginning to look a lot more worrying, as, to put it mildly, these ill-conceived ideas will seriously impair the success of language learning in the classroom.

The following survey therefore serves to challenge these well-worn clichés and popular stereotypes by scrutinizing them from a linguistic and, thus, rather more professional perspective.

### **You should teach children to speak/answer in full sentences at all times**

Teacher trainers, who usually get ample opportunities to observe lessons, may be very familiar with the above. Time and again, language learners, regardless of whether they are young or old, will be asked to answer or speak in full sentences

during speaking drills. However, the fact that this is quite a regular occurrence in foreign language classes does not make it right. Generally, speech is vastly different from writing, in that it is less formal than writing and therefore follows its own rules. Speech is also extremely informal so that it abounds in fillers, interjections, breaks and pauses, sentence fragments and, to use a highly technical term, anacolutha, i.e. a syntactic break in the expected grammatical sequence in a sentence, an unfinished sentence, as it were, that starts using one structure and ends in another (Crystal, 1997, p. 18).

Even though these little words, e.g. 'well', 'you know' etc., do not mean a great deal, they are not redundant, inasmuch as they serve as 'pointers' or 'signposts' in speech; in other words, they help the listener to follow the conversation and the speaker to organise their thoughts, as speech is, by nature, much more spontaneous than writing, which, by the way, uses different devices, e.g. commas, full stops, paragraphs etc., for the same reason (Anderson & Trudgill, 1992). Curiously, these little words are often frowned upon and thus fall under the stigmatised elements of language, i.e. in the same league as double negatives, split infinitives and sentences ending with a preposition. Alas, there are no commas, full stops and paragraphs in speech – so apologies to the grammar pundits.

The crux is that native speakers use these forms both deliberately and subconsciously and when they do so, it is not because they are uneducated, clumsy or careless. It is because most speech settings will be informal and it is therefore much more economical to speak in that fashion. 'Your car?' as a question is therefore a structure that is inherent in both natives' speech and learners' speech, irrespective of age. However, while 'your car?' in a native setting would be considered very normal and more often than not go unnoticed, it would immediately ring the 'alarm bells' in the EFL classroom and learners would be told by their teachers to ask the question properly. This is where the academic style comes in. As the word already implies, it primarily revolves around reading and writing and is thus relatively formal. EFL teachers who correct their learners in this respect mix up a great number of styles and registers, i.e. speech with writing and formal vs. informal style, totally oblivious to the fact that the great majority of speech acts will forever remain informal.

Incidentally, a similar breach in style can be observed in terms of a great many 'listening comprehension exercises' featured in coursebooks and textbooks. Even though coursebook writers may insist that their samples are authentic and natural, we must not forget that these 'dialogues' have been scripted, i.e. are based on a script, thus on writing and are read out by 'bit-part' actors – some would call them 'failed' actors – who would rather be performing in a theatre in the West End or on Broadway than read out scripted dialogues for *More* or *Playway* (very common English coursebooks in Austria). To put it another way, these 'speech' samples are as real, authentic and typical of everyday speech as an item of news

read out by a news anchor/presenter. EFL teachers should be aware of these linguistic subtleties and, therefore, when it comes to speaking skills, begin to not only teach what is 'teachable', but also what is 'natural'. Speaking and answering in full sentences at all times is definitely not 'natural'.

### It is important that you correct children's errors when they speak so that they can learn from their mistakes

Correcting children's or learners' errors while they speak is not only futile and impolite – that is why native speakers never or hardly ever do that – it is also, in the long run, counterproductive, as it wrecks the learners' confidence and increases their inhibitions, putting an undue emphasis on forms and not on meanings.

First and second language research have proved beyond reasonable doubt that learners, i.e. especially children, have their own independent grammar systems that are primarily based on overgeneralisation (e.g. 'sheep' 'sheeps'), simplification (e.g. 'you tired?') and creative construction (e.g. 'Why did they flew away?'). These systems are not only hugely autonomous and, thus, resistant to input and corrections solely based on form (grammatical structures and abstract rules), they also thrive on interaction, language experiments and positive feedback (cf. Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012; Cook & Singleton 2014; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Wiesinger, 2016 a). The said systems are also on a developmental path, thus always in flux, and very successful, given an appropriate environment, i.e. L1 settings, where there is a lot of room for the above (interaction, language experiments and positive feedback focusing on meanings rather than on 'outer form').

The ingenuity of these innate 'language learning devices' and the futility of correcting speech on the basis of grammatical correctness/outer form can be best explained by way of example and the following cartoon, based on Lightbown and Spada's (2013, p. 18) and used in a similar context, illustrates this point very well:



The above picture gives us some deeply revealing insights into the ‘mechanics’ and fundamental laws of language acquisition. First of all, it goes to show that children are invariably focused on meanings and simply ignore input/corrections that are exclusively based on outer form and grammatical structure. Young learners, especially, are cognitively not mature enough to grasp such abstruse information and will therefore happily ignore it, even though, in this particular situation, this abstract information is only implied, i.e. ‘You mean I **put** the plates on the table’ and not expressed explicitly in form of an abstract rule, e.g. ‘regular verbs take the suffix ‘ed’ in the past tense’.

Secondly, the cartoon perfectly illustrates the subtleties of ‘overgeneralisation’, one of the acquisition devices underlying children’s independent grammar systems: apparently, the child has subconsciously acquired a very substantial rule in English, namely regular past tense ‘-ed’, applying it to all kinds of contexts and verbs, even irregular ones (‘put’). In other words, the child’s mother should have felt elated about her child’s progress rather than worried about this minor ‘slip-up’. The same could be said about EFL teachers, because, for obvious reasons, a similar exchange could have occurred in the language classroom at any time. Plus, through sufficient exposure to the language and, even more so, through meaningful interaction and linguistic experiments, the learners will eventually absorb the ‘correct form’ in their memory and their language will sooner or later approximate the target language.

Admittedly, the above cartoon refers to an L1 setting involving natives and can therefore be considered an exception to the rule, as parents generally do not correct their children’s errors. Whether this is because parents instinctively know how to do it right or because they believe it is extremely impolite and off-putting – after all a conversation usually revolves around meanings – cannot be so readily answered. The fact remains that parents hardly ever query their children’s speech and, when they do so, it is usually to clear up a ‘misunderstanding’, thus, to clarify the meaning of what is being said, which, considering children’s predisposition to ‘meanings’, is the precisely correct ‘thing’ to do. It goes without saying that parents would never dream of drilling grammatical patterns, conjugating verbs and parsing sentences at the kitchen table. Curiously enough, though, there is not one child in this world who cannot speak their native tongue with expert-like precision well before the time they eventually go to primary school and who, for that matter, would not be considered as ‘natives’.

How is that even remotely possible? After all, their speech or their grammar has hardly ever been corrected, so how could they possibly learn from their mistakes? The answer lies in the setting. In L1 settings, children are generally allowed to experiment and interact with their environment in meaningful contexts without ever being sanctioned. Quite the reverse, even when they blunder into all kinds of mistakes, they are forever encouraged to keep trying and, ultimately, given very positive feedback.

Just let us look at yet another, admittedly, 'anecdotal' piece of evidence: the order of acquisition governing sounds is considered a language universal, irrespective of which mother tongue is at issue and, as a rule, sounds are usually acquired from front to back in the vocal tract (Jakobson, 1967). In other words, bilabials, such as /m/, /b/ and /p/, formed involving the lips and thus at the front of the vocal tract, will be acquired before dentals and alveolars, e.g. /t/ and /d/, placing the teeth against the alveolar ridge, and eventually followed by velar sounds, e.g. /k/, articulated at the end of the velum, that is, towards the end of the vocal tract. Apparently, velar sounds are invariably more complex to form for an infant learner than bilabials and, in many languages across the world, children initially tend to replace 'tricky' velar sounds, e.g. /k/ by corresponding alveolars, i.e. /t/ and /d/, and often continue to do so until they have fully acquired the /k/ sound at around the age of six (ibid.). This, admittedly, ingenious 'simplification device' (compare 'independent grammar systems' and 'simplification' above) is innate, ubiquitous and thus universal.

So, quite naturally, when my English godchild was about three years old and able to pronounce my name 'Markus' for the first time, she automatically substituted the /k/ sound for a /t/, calling me 'Martus' instead. The crux here is not the fact that she did something very normal, i.e. following Jakobsen's 'principle of relative chronology of phonological development', thus proving the theory to the letter, the intriguing point is the cheerful reaction of her immediate environment and the very positive feedback she received from all the bystanders involved, her parents, their family friends and me included. In other words, my godchild was congratulated on being able to say 'Markus' for the first time, even though, strictly speaking, she definitely did not get it 'right'. Putting it another way, she was given very positive feedback in spite of what, in other circumstances, could be considered 'making a mistake'. Suffice to say, it did not take her long to finally pronounce my name correctly without ever having been formally corrected and shown how to do it 'right' or 'better'.

Now imagine the same happening in an L2 setting, that is, in the EFL classroom. Not only would the poor child have been immediately alerted to her mistake, she would have also been sanctioned, probably made to repeat after the teacher several times, ending up as the laughing stock of this particular class and day. Likewise, L2 settings, i.e. EFL classrooms, also abound in exchanges of the type displayed in the cartoon above with very similar results and effects, that is, the attempted correction is not very likely to sink in, because it is not meaning-based, too abstract and, therefore, from a child's perspective, irrelevant. What they do learn from that is, though, that making a mistake will cause negative feedback and, in the worst case, some serious sanctions. In order to avoid making mistakes, it is therefore best not to speak at all.

Language acquisition theories, on the other hand, prove beyond reasonable doubt that 'mistakes' are an inherent part of the acquisition process brought

about by the learners' independent grammar systems (overgeneralisation, simplification, creative construction), which are always in flux and very resistant to abstract input or, for that matter, corrections focusing on form rather than meaning (cf. Legutke et al., 2012; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Wiesinger, 2016a). Errors are likely to decrease and eventually disappear both for L1 and L2 learners, provided the children are given sufficient exposure to the target language, meaningful interaction and room for language experiments embedded in positive feedback.

Unfortunately, the latter is only ever really achieved in L1 settings, whereas in L2 settings natural acquisition of speaking skills is usually impeded by one specific teaching style, the 'grammar translation method', alias the 'academic style', which is still paramount in a great many foreign language classrooms in Europe, if not around the world. One of its underlying principles is to 'get it right from the beginning'. Accordingly, learners are only expected to speak when they also get it right (Lightbown and Spada, 2013). In this school of thought, there is no room for mistakes. Quite the contrary. Metaphorically speaking, mistakes are like a virus and, if teachers do not stamp them out right from the beginning, they will spread.

As we have seen, this line of reasoning is not only clearly at odds with modern language acquisition research, it is also totally detrimental to the children's learning curve and vastly counterproductive as far as the development of their speaking skills is concerned. Furthermore, learning to speak a language is in a totally different league from learning to write it. It involves many shades of grey – from various levels of style (formal, neutral, informal) and registers to slang and non-standard varieties of English, e.g. 'he don't'. Everyday speech is, therefore, invariably more forgiving than writing, which usually follows the rules of the standard. Accordingly, teachers should never correct their learners' natural flow of speech for the sake of a mistake. It is impolite and discouraging. There is still ample room for correction and corrective feedback, if need be, when it comes to writing (homework, essays, compositions, reports etc.). That this should be done with great care is self-evident.

### **Children first have to understand the grammar underlying the language so that they can speak correctly**

Unfortunately, this belief has also taken hold of generations of language teachers. It is, of course, underpinned by the academic style, but, in this case, it is a little hard to determine 'cause and effect'. It can probably be explained by the vicious circle of university lecturers and teacher trainers instructing their trainees in the academic style, that is, theorising about language at a stylistically academic level – as a technical register or jargon, as it were – on the one hand, and teaching the language in a 'talk-and-chalk' fashion, i.e. 'lecture style' – in short, as a teaching style, on the other. In turn, when EFL students finally graduate and land a job as

a teacher, a great many of them try to ‘reinvent the bicycle’ and teach English in the academic style, even though they have been told (in theory!) that the academic style is detrimental to language learning and especially futile for children, as children are cognitively not mature enough to manage such abstruse academic input. Primary and secondary pupils will then be exposed to this style of teaching for the rest of their school careers and the ‘select few’, that is, the students with an academic mindset, in other words, the only ones who can understand this kind of input will eventually end up at teacher training colleges and universities – to complete the circle.

As implied by its name, this style is primarily academic, requires a lot of abstract thinking and ultimately revolves around ‘reading’ and ‘writing’, two skills, which, by nature, are much more formal than, for example, ‘speaking’. In the process, language, or rather languages come to be scrutinised on the basis of their defining properties while their grammatical structures are constantly contrasted in order to establish rules and principles. What a great many people involved overlook is the fact that ‘language’ thus ceases to be ‘language’, a medium of communication, and is ‘degraded’ or ‘promoted’, depending on how you want to look at it, to an academic subject in the same league as ‘maths’ and ‘science’. This is all very well for tertiary institutions of education, but totally detrimental to, not to say ‘poisonous’ to primary and secondary institutions of education, where the priority is to teach children how to speak a second or third language.

From a language acquisition perspective, that is, linguistically speaking, which, curiously, rests on much more solid academic footing than the ‘academic style’, the ‘grammar translation’ method is, of course, ‘bogus’. When linguists talk about L1 and L2 acquisition, they usually view ‘language’ as a medium of communication, i.e. speech, in particular, as opposed to a mere ‘subject’ that is worthy of academic study.

According to the relevant literature, L1 and L2 acquisition have a lot in common and the similarities between the two definitely outweigh the differences (Wiesinger, 2016a). We know, for example, that children cannot learn to speak a language without interaction and the sooner the input, the better. We further know that learning to speak a language is not a question of intelligence and that language learners, and primarily children, have their own independent grammar systems that are relatively resilient in the face of abstract grammatical input. And, ultimately, we also know that there is a very specific order of acquisition, especially as far as morphemes and grammatical structures are concerned. This order of acquisition is not only highly similar for both L1 and L2, but also frequently leads to a discrepancy between ‘input’ and ‘output’; in other words, the language which learners, native children and second language learners alike, are able to reproduce, at least initially, will invariably be different from their surrounding linguistic environment, that is, the target language. This kind of language has even been given a

name and is dubbed 'inter-language' in the relevant literature. (cf. Brown & Larson Hall, 2012; Cook & Singleton, 2014; Herrschensohn, 2007; Lenneberg, 1967; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Selinker, 1992).

In view of the great many synergies between L1 and L2 acquisition mentioned above, and, as the mechanisms and processes involved appear to be largely the same, it is small wonder that L1 and L2 learners behave, to a large extent, similarly when it comes to learning a language. Just as native children are totally immune to abstract grammatical input and more or less learn through exposure and experiments, young L2 learners are also predisposed to learning by doing. Children growing up in a native environment will speak their mother tongue to a degree of native-like perfection before they go to primary school without ever having been taught the grammar underlying their language explicitly. Some of them will be extremely intelligent, some of them less so, but all of them will be able to use irregular verbs and tenses correctly, form appropriate questions and negate sentences without explicit formal instruction in the rules. The same goes for L2 learners, given the right approach, i.e. meaningful interaction, language experiments supported by games and activities embedded in a relaxed, native-like atmosphere full of emotions and very positive feedback.

Any four- or five-year-old Austrian, German, French etc. learner of English will be able to say 'What's the time?', 'What's your name?', 'How much is it?' and 'How are you?' without formal or explicit instruction in the rules governing the formation of questions. Similarly, children will also be able to use and understand certain irregular verbs, e.g. 'put' or 'went' in a meaningful context without having first been briefed in the complexities of the past tense. This is possible, because a lot of the forms and structures of a language are acquired quite naturally in chunks, always provided, of course, these forms are encountered in a meaningful context (Legutke et al., 2012. Lightbown & Spada, 2013). This is exactly where the academic style is at a loss. Young learners will be able to produce these forms quite readily, if taught implicitly, but they will be forever puzzled if they have to reproduce the said forms on the basis of abstract rules. The notion that they first need to understand or to be told the rules in order to express themselves 'correctly' is a common misconception perpetuated by generations of teachers slavishly following the academic style. What the learners need is meaningful contexts, interaction and positive feedback.

It cannot be denied, though, that for adult learners endowed with an academic mindset the style at issue may have its advantages, especially if time is of the essence, in which case abstract rules and explicit grammar teaching may serve as a convenient shortcut to a reasonably acceptable proficiency level. In contrast, young learners are not made for rules and exhaustive metalinguistic discussions (Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012, p. 17). To put it another way, grammar is best taught implicitly, even though 'grammar-translation' pundits may find it very hard to be-

lieve that present tenses, past tenses, reported speech, questions and the like can be effectively taught and practised without mentioning the aforesaid technical terms even once, let alone without theorising about their underlying rules.

What is more, children learning their native tongue are given about five to six years to learn their L1 through natural channels before the proverbial 'wheat is separated from the chaff', that is, when they finally go to school and their mother tongue begins to take a much more serious shape, notably that of a school, i.e. academic, subject that is based on rules and revolves around 'reading' and 'writing'. Unfortunately, L2 learners are hardly ever given this '5-year breather' and have to 'face the music' pretty much right from the start.

### **Present tenses are easier to learn than past tenses**

A lot of teachers would definitely subscribe to this opinion. However, linguistically speaking, it is just simply wrong. Judgements like these are often based on traditions and conventions, not to say a 'gut feeling' without giving them too much careful thought. It cannot be denied, though, that present tenses are usually introduced before past tenses in EFL coursebooks and textbooks around the world, and it may well be this convention that has given rise to the belief in question.

Linguists, on the other hand, would think twice before passing such a judgement, because there is simply no scale, benchmark or standard of comparison by which we could categorise specific forms and structures, i.e. tenses, into a number of difficulty levels. If there was, on what grounds should that be done? Of course, there are structures that are perceived to be more difficult, because a great number of learners seemingly have difficulty with them. Cognitively speaking, we can also say that learners will struggle with grammatical patterns and forms that affect the deep structure rather than the surface structure of a clause or sentence, but we cannot pin down the difficulty level of the said forms, because there is simply no all-embracing, i.e. valid standard of comparison. By analogy, this is like saying some languages are harder to learn than others (Bauer, 1998: pp. 81 ff.). Should we, for that matter, use the number of case inflections any given language has as our benchmark? Accordingly, Russian and Latin with 6 cases must be classed as difficult, German, perhaps, less so, as it only has 4, and, well, English is the easiest, because it can only boast one, the so-called Saxon Genitive, which can be avoided by using an 'of' construction. We could spin this even a little further and therefore infer that people speaking Russian must be very 'intelligent', German speakers less so, and speakers of English definitely have a great deal of 'shortcomings'. It goes without saying that such a line of reasoning is totally erroneous and beggars all belief.

However, what linguists and language acquisition theorists have been able to prove beyond reasonable doubt after years of meticulous and painstaking research

is the chronological order according to which grammatical forms and structures are acquired. Morpheme studies quite clearly show that there are developmental sequences governing the acquisition of morphemes, i.e. which morphemes (the smallest meaningful units in a language) are acquired first and which morphemes are learnt last. Brown (1973), Dulay and Burt (1974) and Krashen (1982, 1985, 1988) were the pioneers in this respect and the table below reflects the order of morpheme acquisition for both L1 and L2 learners of English established back in the eighties.

Developmental Sequences in L1	Developmental Sequences in L2
• 'ing'	• the/a
• plural 's'	• 'ing'
• irreg. past	• plural 's'
• poss. 's'	• reg. past ('ed')
• the/a	• irreg. past
• reg. past ('ed')	• poss. 's'
• 3rd person sg. 's'	• 3rd person sg. 's'

(Wiesinger, 2016 b)

Comparing these L1 and L2 sequences with each other, we may say that the similarities are quite intriguing. Most morphemes occur within a range of two positions, that is, apart from the articles 'the/a' (1 versus 5). However, most striking in this connection is the position of 3rd person sg. 's', which, apparently, is acquired last by both native speakers and foreign learners of English.

Dulay and Burt's approach to second language acquisition proved to be a trend-setter at the time and much research work was directly modelled on theirs. No matter whether these tests were conducted with adults or children, with different nationalities or even in settings where English was only taught at school as a second language, that is, in countries other than the USA, Canada, Australia and Great Britain, they basically yielded similar results. There have been tables where the position of possessive 's' and 3rd person sg. 's' is reversed (cf. Archibald, 1997. Cook, 2001), but, basically, the trend remains the same: 3rd person sg. 's' is acquired relatively late in both the first language as well as in the second language (Wiesinger, 2005).

Although the above piece of evidence helps to answer our initial question, it simultaneously raises quite a few others. As the 3rd person sg. 's' only and exclusively occurs in the present tense simple, it can simply not be true that present tenses are 'easier' to learn than past tenses, as, curiously, the 3rd person sg. 's' is acquired last by natives and EFL learners alike. We do not know why, though. After all, it is just a 'tiny bit' of a morpheme, especially compared with the vast maze of morphemes that can be encountered in more inflected languages like German

or Russian (*ibid.*). This is why notions of 'difficult' and 'easy' are somewhat flawed, from a strictly linguistic point of view, and language teachers should therefore be careful before jumping to the wrong conclusions, thereby creating difficulties which are not perceived as such by the learners.

Much more worrying in this respect is how much out of tune with modern language acquisition research generations of EFL teachers and a great many coursebook writers seem to be. Mnemonic devices like *he, she, it 's' geht mit* speak volumes about the 'fuss' EFL teachers usually make about the 3rd person sg. 's'. All they are going to achieve by these drills is expand the children's repertoire of nursery rhymes. The children will, however, not add the 's' just because they have been told to do so. Children crave meanings and this is exactly what the 3rd person sg. 's' fails to do, which, perhaps, explains why numerous non-standard English dialects do without it (Wiesinger, 2005).

Even though local dialects and regional accents are often frowned upon for not having 'grammar' or are considered 'incorrect' by a great many people, linguists beg to differ on this view. Against the linguistic backdrop of Great Britain, Standard English is just one dialect amongst a great many. It is, without doubt, the most prestigious variety, primarily spoken by the most educated people in the country and, therefore, deemed as more 'correct' than other non-standard varieties of English. However, when this particular dialect was chosen as a model for standardisation around 1500 AD, this was not done on the basis of 'correctness'. On the contrary, it was chosen as the standard because it happened to be spoken by the most powerful and influential people living in and around the area of modern-day London. Notions of 'correctness' only crept into the language about three hundred years later with the advent of prescriptive grammar (Crystal, 2006).

Generally, dialects may deviate from the standard, but they are just as consistent and rule-governed as their more prestigious counterpart. It is thus not un-English or foreign to say 'he don't', 'she don't'. Speakers who use these forms may run the risk of being pigeonholed as 'uneducated' or 'working-class', but not necessarily as 'foreign' or as 'having made a mistake', given a native-like accent. Conversely, there are English dialects where 's' occurs in any position, e.g. 'I likes it', 'They knows it', 'Where was you' etc. (cf. Anderson and Trudgill, 1992. Trudgill, 1997. Wiesinger, 2005). Against all this evidence, it is quite surprising that a lot of EFL teachers are still trying to do the impossible and teach the 3rd person sg. 's' first, as if putting the proverbial cart before the horse would help matters.

As this brief excursion into sociolinguistics has shown, it is quite widespread to drop the 's' in informal and regional speech. Similarly, language acquisition theories and morpheme studies, in particular, have demonstrated quite conclusively that forms and structures in a language are acquired in a specific, seemingly pre-determined and natural order, which is possibly an innate trait of humankind as a whole. These sequences are universal as well as irreversible, in that L1 and L2

learners appear to be going through similar stages of acquisition. Trying to teach a structure or, for that matter, a morpheme that is usually acquired late at an early stage is doomed, insofar as learners cannot skip one or several sequences preordained by this natural order of acquisition. EFL teachers should thus pay heed to these linguistic subtleties and, perhaps, view their coursebooks more critically, as grammar in coursebooks is usually introduced as a whole and ignores this subtle order of sequences. It is, for example, a fact that the first questions a learner of a language – native or not – can naturally form will be two-word combinations, as in ‘you tired?’, ‘new car?’, that is, except for the ones that are acquired in chunks. These two-word clusters are quite common to informal speech as well, but very alien to writing and are thus not very likely to ever appear in a coursebook (Legutke et al., 2012. Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

### Learning to speak a language is a question of intelligence

A lot of non-experts believe that learning to speak languages involves intelligence and, unfortunately, many EFL teachers subscribe to this language myth as well. However, this unfounded belief can easily be refuted for a number of reasons. Undoubtedly, there is not one child in this world that has not learnt to speak their native tongue well before they enter primary school. They will all grow up faring either well or badly at school, some of them graduating and pursuing an academic career, others may learn a trade and, eventually, there may be the unlucky few who will remain ‘social underdogs’ for pretty much most of their lives and perhaps never land a job. Some of them will be classed as ‘educated’, or in ‘layman’s terms’ as ‘intelligent’, while others will be labelled as ‘uneducated’, or more derogatorily as ‘unintelligent’. However, it cannot be denied that all these children will have learnt to speak their mother tongue to native-like perfection, though, admittedly, employing varying degrees of styles. ‘Educated’ people will be able to switch between various levels of style and registers, i.e. between ‘formal’, ‘neutral’, ‘informal’ and ‘colloquial’, move freely from technical jargons and slang to educated and academic usage. General practitioners, for example, in the UK may ‘test their patients’ reflexes’ while calling the same procedure ‘checking on somebody’s jerks’ when talking to their peers or colleagues in a less formal situation (Anderson & Trudgill, 1992).

Educated people will also be harder to place, especially if they have successfully adopted an RP accent, which is only spoken by about 2 to 3 % of the entire population in the UK and, curiously, that is, for an accent, only serves as an indicator of class and education, but does not yield any information about the speakers’ regional backgrounds (cf. Crystal, 1990; Crystal, 1999; Hannah & Trudgill, 2002; Trudgill, 1997; Wells, 1996). Less ‘educated’ people will also have a number of styles and registers at their disposal, possibly not as many, and the academic style – as

a linguistic register and not as a teaching method – will probably be not one of them. In other words, what a great many non-experts consider as ‘intelligence’ is best subsumed under ‘education’ and has nothing to do with people’s natural disposition towards language, or in Chomskyan terms, the ‘Language Acquisition Device’, usually abbreviated as LAD (Chomsky, 1965).

Learning to speak a language, regardless of L1 or L2, therefore does not involve the kind of intelligence that scientists and psychologists measure in so-called ‘IQ’ tests (Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012; Legutke et al., 2012; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Writing and reading, however, definitely do. Let us just, for argument’s sake, assume an EFL teacher was trying to teach the pronunciation of the word ‘hiccough’, as spelt in British English or ‘hiccup’ in American English, in a second language classroom. None of the children, irrespective of their age, will have any difficulty saying ‘hiccough’ after their teacher. If the same teacher had, instead, displayed the spelling of the word, the learners would have been seriously intrigued, not to say ‘puzzled’, by the word’s very curious orthographic characteristics and probably failed to pronounce it correctly, as learning to read and write a language obviously involves totally different skills from speaking – the ability to think in the abstract is definitely one of them and this is where ‘education’ or, if you will, ‘intelligence’ comes in as a determining or decisive factor.

Many EFL teachers have thus misread or misinterpreted the situation and jump to the wrong conclusions, falsely believing their children are not very ‘intelligent’ and thus not very good at English, when they talk about grammar in theory and detect utter miscomprehension in their learners’ faces. What makes matters worse, they are then likely to switch into the children’s mother tongue, as if explaining the same abstract matter in L1 would make any difference to children who are cognitively simply not mature enough to process such abstruse, theoretical input. In other words, these children may not be very ‘academic’, but they might still be able to learn to speak the language, given a more communicative and thus natural approach.

### **Children primarily learn through imitation, thus EFL teachers should serve as role models and be word-perfect**

Young learners and children, in particular, are often quoted as being like ‘sponges’, naturally absorbing the language that is spoken around them (Legutke et al, 2012; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). While this is generally true in terms of pronunciation – except for native infants still trying to get to grips with the articulation of especially velar sounds – and vocabulary, the same cannot be said about the syntax and grammar of a language. Just as children proceed little by little when acquiring the sound system of their mother tongue, usually from the front of the vocal tract to the back, grammatical structures and morphemes are acquired in a very specific

order, which, it must be said, seems to be a little more time-consuming than the acquisition of sounds, and will take even longer for L2 learners, owing to the lack of exposure to the target language.

This natural order of acquisition is underpinned by the learners' independent grammar systems, which are totally different from the surrounding target language, resistant to abstract input and thrive on interaction and experiments, regardless of which language is actually involved, i.e. L1 or L2 or even L3. For that matter, language learners do not and will not be able to produce grammatical patterns they have not yet fully acquired in the aforesaid natural order of acquisition. Through grammatical drill, academically gifted L2 learners may manage to do gap-filling exercises quite successfully, but when forced to speak, that is, when they are under pressure of time, as speech is much more spontaneous, they are very likely to return to the status quo ante, especially if the form that is being practised is a little premature, thus 'leapfrogging' several sequences in the natural order of acquisition (cf. Krashen, 1982, 1985, 1988).

While, in L1 settings, it is considered quite natural that learners speak very differently from their adult environment and more or less taken for granted, discrepancies between the learners' language and the target language are usually frowned upon, i.e. classed as 'mistakes', in L2 settings, even though the children cannot and will not, for obvious reasons, 'parrot' their teachers' language patterns. By analogy, there are simply no EFL teachers in this world who would constantly drop the 3rd person sg. 's'. Quite the contrary. They will be extra careful not to drop it, as they, just like so many others, have been brought up in the academic style of language teaching. Nonetheless, the great majority of L2 learners will drop the 's', because, technically, they are not yet able to reproduce it, as the 3rd person sg. 's' invariably comes last. In similar fashion, learners will hear fully-fledged questions, e.g. 'Do you have a new car?' (input) uttered by their teachers, their role models, as it were, and reduce them to 'new car?' (output) when asked to form the question themselves.

EFL teachers' grammar skills are therefore totally overrated. Their language proficiency is definitely a bonus when it comes to the L2 classroom. However, their didactic skills and methodological expertise in planning wonderfully communicative as well as interactive lessons, thus providing a relaxed and warm atmosphere where children feel free to experiment with language are definitely much more of an issue here.

### 3. Conclusion

Having looked critically at six fairly widespread teaching beliefs – numerous others could have been scrutinised as well – it is still very hard to believe how firmly entrenched in the system these practices have become. Viewing them on the basis

of recent sociolinguistic and language acquisition research has shown how absurd some of them are and sufficient evidence has been presented to suggest that explicit grammar teaching, as an inherent part of the academic style, also called the grammar-translation method, has to be very seriously reviewed. Having also cast some light on the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 acquisition, ultimately concluding that, as L1 acquisition is so invariably more successful than L2 acquisition, it is probably worth every EFL teacher's while to simulate the conditions that are at work in L1 settings and superimpose them onto L2 settings. For the sake of learners' speaking skills and fluency, lessons must therefore involve much more meaningful interaction, allow for language experiments in a warm and natural speaking environment and provide considerably more positive feedback. This, ultimately, means that 'explicit grammar' teaching should become a 'thing of the past', as parsing sentences and conjugating verbs is simply not done in L1 settings.

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