



Synergies between L1 and L2 and their practical implications for the EFL classroom

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RECEIVED 7 JUN 2017

REVISED 29 OCT 2017

ACCEPTED 30 OCT 2017

The present article seeks to establish synergies between L1 and L2 acquisition and, thus, has practical implications for the EFL classroom. Carefully juxtaposing insights that have been gained through L1 and L2 research will further yield sufficient evidence that explicit grammar teaching has to be very critically reviewed, as it is simply not done in L1 acquisition – one fact, amongst a great many others, that may explain why L1 acquisition is invariably more successful than L2 acquisition. Finally, as interaction and positive feedback seem to be at the core of the matter, some practical hints will be given as to how to simulate successful L1 conditions in L2 classrooms by using interactive games and activities that help to boost the learners' confidence and, in the long run, their fluency and speaking skills.

KEYWORDS: independent grammar systems, morpheme studies, natural order of acquisition, academic style, practical implications, L1 and L2 acquisition theories

1. Introduction

The present article aims to establish synergies between L1 and L2 acquisition and has practical implications for teacher training courses and EFL classrooms in both primary and secondary education. As a great many of the underlying theories suggest that the acquisition process in both L1 and L2 is fairly similar and as 'interaction' seems to be at the core of the matter (cf. Lenneberg, 1967; Cook & Singleton, 2014; Johnson & Newport, 1989; Herrschensohn, 2007; Schachter, 1996), it is high time that the 'grammar translation' method, sometimes also referred to as the 'academic style' or as 'get it right from the beginning', was replaced by more interactive approaches to L2 teaching.

Thus, the following section sets out to describe some of the defining properties of the academic style, illustrating how its fundamental principles have come to underpin a whole school of thought and vice versa, so that generations of language teachers have never ceased to steadfastly subscribe to the teaching style in question.

After briefly 'consulting' the Austrian curriculum for teaching English (section 3) in order to see what the government's position is on the situation, section 4

and subsequent sections will first cast some light on the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 acquisition, and then go on to give some practical hints as to how to exploit these findings in the EFL classroom. Some of the inferences made in the process will be that learners' speaking skills and, for that matter, their fluency can only be improved by providing meaningful interaction embedded in a warm and relaxing atmosphere. This will ultimately require teachers to simulate some of the conditions that render L1 acquisition so much more efficient than L2 acquisition in their EFL classes, and thus switch to a totally different teaching style: a communicative style of language teaching that, underpinned by interactive games and activities, allows for language experiments and is very forgiving when it comes to mistakes. Parsing sentences and conjugating verbs is an alien concept when learning a language through natural channels and, as section 3 will show, is strongly discouraged by the curriculum for very good reasons.

2. The academic style

The 'academic style', as a teaching method, comes with a variety of names and is, for very good reasons, also called the 'grammar-translation' method, or sometimes referred to, quite nonchalantly, as 'get it right from the beginning' (cf. Cook, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). It has been with us for centuries, starting out with the study of ancient Greek and Latin in the middle ages, hence the emphasis on translation, and truly gathered momentum with the rise of nationalism and the advent of prescriptive grammar teaching in the 17th and 18th centuries (Crystal, 2006). National languages had finally been deemed worthy of study and grammatical concepts and terms inherent to the study of ancient Greek and Latin came to be superimposed on these newly emerging 'subjects' at a great many universities across Europe. The dawn of prescriptive grammar has also given rise to notions of 'correctness' in language studies, i.e. 'right' or 'wrong', and has also helped to entrench this specific teaching style even further. It is, thus, primarily based on conventions and traditions which, viewed from a linguistic perspective, are not only ill-conceived and counterproductive, especially when teaching speaking skills, but have also taken hold of generations of language teachers around the world.

Explicit grammar teaching is paramount in this style, partly based on the misconception that learners of a language are only able to string a few sentences together once they have understood the rules underlying them, thus ignoring the fact that native children do not acquire their fluency through explicit rules, but through meaningful interaction and experiments. Likewise, L2 learners, irrespective of their age and proficiency, can quite certainly say 'What's your name?' without having been formally instructed in the grammatical properties governing the formation of questions (Wiesinger, 2016).

Owing to the overriding impact of prescriptive grammar, there is no room for experiments, as, generally, learners are only expected to speak when they get it right. It is small wonder, then, that mistakes are considered an anathema, something that has to be stamped out at all costs and, consequently, learners' flow of speech is constantly interrupted for the sake of an error. After all, it is important that language students learn from their mistakes and teachers have to set the right examples and make sure the 'mistake' does not spread, so that it does not affect other learners as well.

A typical EFL classroom subscribing to the grammar-translation method is rife with metalanguage (tenses, reported speech, superlatives, participles etc.) and grammar is taught in the abstract on the basis of rules, mnemonic devices such as "'i' before 'e' except after 'c'", "he, she it 's' geht mit" and 'signal words' (e.g. 'already' is a signal word for the present perfect tense, as in 'I have already done it'), in short, even more rules, and their exceptions (when I arrived, he was already there!?), because a great many of these rules are more suitable to describe maths ('two negatives make a positive') than language ('double negation is illogical'). Further, these language classes will thrive on regular parsing of sentences, e.g. describing the principal parts of speech on the basis of their grammatical functions, i.e. nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, gerunds etc., conjugating verbs and declensions of nouns followed by rigid pattern drills that will, in turn, be accompanied by a great many worksheets featuring gap-filling and cloze exercises. In the process, L1 and L2 will be constantly contrasted in terms of rules and principles of usage, and the learners will be continuously asked to translate from L1 into L2 and vice-versa.

As the style in question also professes to be 'academic', hence the name, it primarily revolves around reading and writing, more or less expecting the students to learn how to speak by themselves. After all, once they have been told how to do it in theory and have had all this practice in writing, they should be more than ready to speak correctly.

It goes without saying that the teaching style described above has a great many short-comings – utter disregard for the learners' speaking skills and complete failure to increase their fluency, being just one of them. What is more, it only caters for the academically gifted students and, as we shall see in section 4, is totally at odds with recent language acquisition theories. Much more worryingly, however, a great many readers will have immediately recognized this kind of teaching style as part of their own school experience, which just goes to show how incredibly wide-spread the academic style still is. Thus, it is perhaps a good idea to see what the Austrian curriculum has to say on this matter.

3. And the curriculum?

Generally, the Austrian curriculum gives EFL teachers much leeway in their selection of teaching methods and styles. It does not prescribe any specific teaching strategies or the methods by which teachers should meet the required attainment targets and so-called 'educational standards', which is sometimes dubbed 'complete methodological and didactic freedom'. The 'educational standards', on the other hand, are specifically stipulated.

However, the curriculum is quite specific in its emphasis on **interaction** involving communicative and multi-sensory approaches as well as task-based learning. Lessons should further be governed by the **oral principle**, i.e. focus on learners' fluency and, as a rule, **grammar** has to be taught in **meaningful contexts**. What is more, it suggests teachers subscribe to the '**English-only**' principle, thus use the mother tongue only sparingly and when need be. It also encourages teachers to employ cross-curricular initiatives, such as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). For the same reason, the curriculum quite explicitly **bans translation** as a means to an end and as a teaching principle. In other words, teachers are only allowed to translate sporadically, i.e. to get the meaning of a word across quickly and therefore save time, but not as a matter of principle (Bundesministerium für Bildung, 2016, retrieved 25 May 2017).

As can be deduced from the above, the Austrian curriculum for English is quite progressive and perfectly in line with modern language acquisition theories, according to which the mechanisms and principles that are at work in L1 and L2 acquisition are fairly similar. The acquisition process, *per se*, is a language universal. Therefore, learning to speak a language is not a question of intelligence, neither in L1 nor in L2. However, in order to acquire a language successfully, meaningful interaction embedded in a natural environment is required. There is simply no language acquisition without interaction. Furthermore, language learners, no matter whether they are learning L1 or L2, have independent grammar systems which are on a developmental path and quite resistant to abstract input and corrective feedback based solely on form. This, in turn, leads to a discrepancy between 'input' and 'output' (teacher input: he doesn't; student output: he don't). Learners' speech, therefore, will forever be different from the target language, at least initially, which is a fact that is pretty much taken for granted and considered normal in L1 settings, but frowned upon in L2 settings. Accordingly, 'mistakes' are not only 'developmental', but also very normal and natural (cf. Brown 1973; Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012; Burt & Dulay, 1974; Cook & Singleton, 2014; Chomsky, 1965; Legutke et al., 2012; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Herrschennsohn, 2007).

It is remarkable that the national curriculum actually pays heed to all these linguistic subtleties and is insightful in acknowledging the state of the art. Even though it does not once mention the academic style verbatim, it quite explicitly

rules out one of its governing principles: abstract and explicit grammar teaching. It is even more explicit when it comes to translation, in that it is banned. There are a good number of reasons for this: first of all, there are hardly any true equivalents across languages. Strictly speaking, we would even have to wonder whether German 'Butter' or English 'butter' are equivalent, as the latter is thick, yellowy and salted and the former is not (Bassnett, 2003). Secondly, it literally invites the learners to think in first language patterns leading to errors caused by language transfer and interference, which is something that language learners, especially, are very prone to do. This is why 'translation' is a skill that has to be specifically practised. Interpreters and translators spend years and years of training at universities to learn how to effectively rise above the source text and produce an idiomatic target text with roughly the same impact. Thirdly, a great many words encountered in primary and lower secondary are very concrete. So why not use an object or a picture instead? This is exactly what the curriculum wants teachers to do: teach in meaningful contexts.

How firmly entrenched in the system the grammar-translation method alias the academic style has become is perhaps best illustrated by way of example. The following are samples of exercises and tasks taken from worksheets designed by Austrian teachers and trainee teachers, who, if asked, would definitely agree that they teach English according to the curriculum.

1) Fill in either present perfect or past tense:

I (buy) this book yesterday.

(gap-filling exercise contrasting present perfect and past tense)

2) Ask questions about the words underlined:

Cows eat grass.

(from a worksheet intended to revise and consolidate interrogatives)

3) Fill in the missing comparative and superlative forms:

good

(from a worksheet targeting comparisons of adjectives)

4) Translate the following words or sentences:

Jeden Tag fährt Thomas mit dem Bus zur Schule

(from a words and phrases test)

Needless to say, these four examples are pretty much against every rule in the book and totally in breach of the curriculum. Not a single one of these exercises is even remotely presented in a meaningful context. Exercise 2 is so abstract and cryptic that it requires further explanation. The learners are meant to ask the questions in such a way that the word(s) underlined can be prompted as an answer, e.g. *What do cows eat?* Grass. Who eats grass? Cows. It is not only very chal-

lenging to figure out the concept behind the task, the questions themselves are so terribly far-fetched and unreal that it almost beggars belief.

Exercise 4 is curious insofar as it is so perfectly illegal: translation as a means to an end is explicitly banned by the curriculum, but then using it as a basis for assessment, i.e. in a words and phrases test, really 'tops' it all. Plus, this exercise beautifully illustrates how intrinsically difficult translation is and that it is banned for a very good reason, as '*everyday drives Thomas with the bus to school*' is probably what a lot of learners will feel tempted to render it as. Non-expert translators are generally prone to translate very literally, because they have simply not learnt to rise above the source text and are, thus, oblivious to the deep structure of a sentence. As a result, they will proceed in a very similar fashion to 'Google Translator' and, very likely, also ignore that 'drive' should actually be 'go' in this context.

Apparently, as a great deal in the teaching profession is based on well-established conventions and long-standing traditions, it is perhaps not really surprising that these didactic and methodological stipulations by the curriculum have gone largely unnoticed by the teachers. Even coursebook writers now seem to have reacted to the trend. Admittedly, coursebooks have to comply with the curriculum and will be carefully scrutinised before they are approved by the respective schoolboards, but explicit grammar sections have either been moved to the end of any given chapter or 'unit', i.e. are hard to find, or have disappeared completely. Miraculously, teachers still manage to find them and then go on to teach these linguistic properties explicitly, e.g. '*Today we are going to talk about the present perfect tense*'. In some respects, the curriculum can thus be likened to the Holy Bible: a lot of people have heard of it and profess to know it, but only very few have actually read it.

4. Synergies between L1 and L2

A great many of the insights above are based on the fact that the acquisition process in both L1 and L2 is fairly similar, if not totally identical, for some forms and structures acquired by the learners. Morpheme studies have shown beyond reasonable doubt that children, no matter whether they are natives or foreign learners, are endowed with independent grammar systems that are on a developmental path, that is, still developing. In the process of acquisition, children use devices that are readily available to them, e.g. over-generalisation of rules ('putted', 'sheeps'), simplification strategies ('teacher car?', 'you tired?') and creative construction ('Why did they flew away?'), i.e. 'creating' their own rules. These, admittedly, ingenious 'language acquisition devices' only emerge through the learners' interaction with their immediate environment (cf. Brown, 1973; Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012; Burt & Dulay, 1982; Cook & Singleton, 2014; Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Even though this early stage of learning is highly experimental, there appears to be a natural order of acquisition, in that certain forms and structures are acquired before others. In other words, learners will only master forms and structures they are able to reproduce at a particular stage of learning and proceed step by step and little by little, irrespective of the input they are given at any one time. This is why overly correcting children's speech is not only detrimental to the learning process, it is also absolutely futile, as children, natives and foreign learners alike, generally ignore corrections solely based on form and structure (Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; MacKey, 2012). I myself once observed the following exchange between a native English mother and her, presumably, three- or four-year-old child:

Child: Mummy, why did they flew to Canada?
Mother: You mean, 'why did they fly to Canada'?
Child: Yes, exactly. Why did they flew to Canada?

As we can see from the above, the mother's attempt at correcting her child utterly failed to hit home. Children are focused on meanings and crave meaningful exchanges when learning and experimenting with language, because otherwise no learning will take place. Needless to say, a similar exchange could have easily occurred in any given EFL classroom.

Be that as it may, these subtleties are frequently ignored in the language classroom, as grammar topics are traditionally introduced as a whole and, even more so, in the abstract, e.g. 'questions and interrogatives', disregarding the fact that the forms the learners are most likely to produce initially will resemble 'two-word' combinations with a rising intonation ('new car?'), i.e. far from the intended target structure.

What is more, these sequences of acquisition are universal and also irreversible. Learners who have acquired a certain form may sometimes revert to the status quo ante, but they will never 'leapfrog' or 'skip' a stage required by this natural order of acquisition. The crux of the matter is that regardless of which area of grammar we scrutinise, e.g. 'relatives', 'questions', 'negation' etc. (cf. Lightbown & Spada, 2013) or irrespective of which morphemes we look at – the 3rd person sg. 's' is acquired last by both native speakers and foreign learners, which, paradoxically, is usually taught relatively early in EFL classrooms (cf. Wiesinger, 2005) – the above order of sequences applies equally to first and second language learners. Errors and mistakes should therefore be viewed as developmental, brought about by the learners' independent grammars and interlanguage systems – a language that is 'neither here nor there', as it were, and constantly developing (Selinker, 1992).

As L1- and L2 acquisition appear to be so similar, at least as far as morpheme studies and developmental sequences are concerned, and as interaction seems to be at the core of the acquisition process, all it takes to render L2 instruction more effective is to simulate conditions that are at work in L1 settings, especially in view

of the fact that L1 acquisition is generally successful: children around the world learn their mother tongue naturally and without great effort so that nobody in their right mind would consider them as non-natives by the time they go to primary school.

Naturally, with L2 learners, we must not overlook the impact the first language has on the second language and it is true that a great many errors are also caused by direct transfer and interference of the first language. However, the more effectively L2 teachers manage to shut out the mother tongue in their language classes, the less likely these blunders are to occur.

Why L1 acquisition is generally successful and L2 acquisition is not

In L1 settings, children are usually brought up in a natural, caring environment surrounded by their parents, siblings, close family relations, friends and acquaintances. L2 settings, on the other hand, are generally institutionalised (classroom) and, thus, highly unnatural. The language involved in L1 can be described as a language of 'love' and 'care'; in short, it is full of emotion and empathy, whereas typical classroom discourse is fairly stilted, devoid of emotions and reminiscent of written English, thus again very unnatural. What is more, typical classroom interchange is often reduced to commands and instructions, e.g. 'Take out your book!', 'Hand in your homework!', 'Be quiet', in other words, not very cheerful. Therefore, it is not surprising that the children involved fail to show great sympathy for a language in which they are usually being bossed around.

While there is usually a great deal of interaction between the parents, other family members and the child so that language can be acquired naturally, focusing on meanings in a relatively relaxed and loving learning environment, institutionalised settings traditionally place great emphasis on reading and writing, disregarding the fact that language is primarily a means of communication.

In L1 settings children automatically increase their proficiency, because they are allowed and encouraged by their surroundings to learn by experiment (trial and error) without being sanctioned when making a mistake. In L2 settings teachers are often so focused on formal correctness that even the slightest deviation from the standard is immediately sanctioned, slavishly following the doctrine of 'get it right in the beginning'. Therefore, there is no room for any experiments or errors, as children are generally expected to only speak when they 'get it right'. To make matters worse, language is often taught in the abstract and the approach is rather academic, usually revolving around rules that are so complex and theoretical (use of metalanguage) that only the select few, i.e. children with a truly academic mindset and the capability of abstract thinking can follow. As a rule, young learners are cognitively not mature enough to fathom such abstruse and hypothetical input (Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012). By the way, learning to speak a language is not a question of intelligence. Any child can learn to speak any number of languages effortlessly, provided the input

happens early enough and the learning environment approximates that of L1 as closely as possible (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Learning to read and write, however, definitely involves intelligence. So do abstract rules and the ability to 'parley' in the metalanguage. Teachers who claim that their children are simply not good enough at the foreign language they are supposed to learn have misinterpreted the situation – their learners are probably not very academic, but they would definitely be able to pick up the language, given a different approach.

As regards habit formation, the feedback L1 learners are given is, in the majority of cases, very positive. Parents are often elated and cheer when their 'toddler' manages to say a word that is not even remotely close to the target and would forever encourage their child to keep trying. Sometimes the children are also given negative feedback. However, when this is the case, it is solely done on the basis of meanings, i.e. to perhaps clarify a misunderstanding caused by the child's misuse of a word. In stark contrast to this, feedback in the L2 classroom is frequently negative, especially as it is usually given on the basis of formal correctness. Children will simply blunder into all kinds of mistakes when they make an effort to speak and, while they get away with it in L1 scenarios, they are told off in L2 settings. It is little wonder, then, that so many learners try to keep a very low profile in the classroom, not daring to speak up and remaining forever 'silent' or 'shtum'.

When learning the mother tongue, grammar and vocabulary are acquired naturally through exposure and interaction, that is, in meaningful contexts. With L2 acquisition, on the other hand, we are usually faced with a lack of exposure. Even if the teacher manages to create or simulate a native-speaking environment and to keep an 'all-English' classroom, thus immersing the children in the proverbial 'language bath', there are hardly ever sufficient lessons to make it work (Legutke et al., 2012). Admittedly, cross-curricular approaches and CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) could help teachers to compensate for some of these shortcomings but, as things stand, we are still a long way from having those alternative teaching styles implemented on a more regular basis.

Arguably, the language used in L1 settings is very natural. Native speakers' speech can be clear and careful as well as sloppy and slurred. It definitely abounds in very lively intonation patterns and is also permeated with gap fillers and conversation gambits. In everyday speech, that is, as opposed to the careful, deliberate speech used in academic circles, natives hardly ever speak in full sentences and use a lot of words that grammar pundits would class as 'meaningless', 'redundant', or even as 'bad English'. Although these words (e.g. 'you know', 'you see', 'well' to name but a few) may convey relatively little meaning, they definitely serve a purpose: they function as 'pointers' or 'sign posts', in a manner of speaking, and help the listener to follow the conversation just as writing relies on full stops, colons, commas, paragraphs etc. in order to show how different parts of text are related to each other (Anderson & Trudgill, 1992).

The language that can be encountered in institutionalised L2 settings (classroom) is a completely 'different kettle of fish'. First of all, it is absolutely devoid of the expressions above, because some teachers are simply not confident or fluent enough to use them. Others may deem these expressions as confusing, fearing that the learners could suffer from 'information overload', which is, of course, bogus. Children are usually very quick to adapt and will soon learn to discern these words as what they are – 'redundant' and thus be able to focus on the full import of what is being said. Secondly, the language that is employed by a not inconsiderable number of EFL teachers is way too formal and, as mentioned before, very reminiscent of a style predominantly used in writing. In short, it is exactly this breech of style that may puzzle and confuse the learners, as it is not only extremely unnatural but also very hard to follow. In like fashion, learners are often made to produce hypercorrect speech and instructions like the following 'Answer in a full sentence, please' are not uncommon, indeed. This would be all very well if only native speakers behaved in the same manner. The problem is they do not. Consider the following, very natural and therefore native-like exchange:

- A: What's your favourite colour?
B: Green.

In the language classroom, many teachers will probably insist on a more elaborate answer (e.g. 'Please, answer in a full sentence!') along the lines of 'My favourite colour is green', which bearing a natural learning situation in mind is simply grotesque and 'unreal'.

Similarly 'unreal' are questions and answers used in L2 settings. While the questions that are asked and the answers that are given in a native-speaking environment are absolutely genuine, the questions that are encountered in the EFL classroom are at best rhetorical, if not very artificial, and hardly ever based on a meaningful exchange.

Finally, we can also observe a discrepancy in terms of input, which is generally provided early in L1 settings (right after birth, if not prenatally) and usually delayed in L2 settings, that is, after the age of 5 or 6 (Herrschensohn, 2007). Even though the critical-period hypothesis seems to be widely accepted for L1 acquisition and hotly debated for L2 acquisition – there have been cases where adult learners outperformed young learners, thus not exactly proving the hypothesis wrong but definitely putting it into question – we cannot deny that the sooner the input takes place the better. Besides, a lot of these studies were carried out in institutionalised settings where analytical thinking was required based on the academic style, so it is perhaps not very surprising that some adult learners could indeed outperform their younger counterparts (Cook & Singleton, 2014).

Having now looked at some fundamental principles of L1 and L2 acquisition, albeit very briefly, the following hints and tips should give the reader an insight into the practical implications of the above.

Practical implications/conclusions

- (1) EFL teachers or L2 teachers, in general, should try to create a 'native-speaking' environment. In other words, the mother tongue should be avoided at all costs, especially when practising speaking skills. Offering too many quick and readily made translations lures the children into the misbelief that there are always equivalents across languages and encourages them to think in the mother tongue rather than in the target language. How can we possibly translate words like 'Wiener Schnitzel' or 'Neue Mittelschule'? The answer is we cannot because these things do not exist, as such, in English-speaking countries and, therefore, have to be explained or paraphrased.

Historically, English has always been a contact language and therefore it abounds in words that are highly polysemic, e.g. 'put' or 'go' etc. The champion in this respect is the inconspicuous word 'set', which has 58 uses as a noun, 126 as a verb and 10 as a participial adjective (Wiesinger, 2006). It is exactly this fact which led Bill Bryson to comment that 'its meanings are so various and scattered that it takes the OED 60,000 words – the length of a short novel – to discuss them all. A foreigner could be excused for thinking that to know 'set' is to know English' (2009, 63). Simply translating it as 'setzen, legen, stellen', as done in a great many glossaries on irregular verbs, is not only very misleading but, strictly speaking, wrong.

Translation also always invites a strong element of the first language and automatically causes errors brought about by language transfer and interference, so that, eventually, the language will begin to look like 'Deutschlish' or 'Engleutsch'. A lot of especially concrete terms can be better explained by means of a picture or the object itself, e.g. 'apple', and thus do not need translating. Plus, using a picture or the object itself when teaching new words is exactly what our national curriculum expects teachers to do, notably to teach in 'meaningful contexts'.

- (2) As interaction is so important, EFL teachers should use English naturally in all sorts of contexts and not only when they are focused on the subject matter, otherwise it is only reduced to a language of instruction with rather damaging consequences. Teachers should thus enquire about their learners' feelings, cheer them up and, if need be, comfort them. Interaction can also be maintained through games and activities as well as through extensive use of pair- and group work.

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- (3) Child-directed speech should be used when explaining things and technical terms should be employed only sparingly. Teachers ought to rephrase and put things in another way, always supporting anything they have to say by mime and gesture. Cramming children's minds with a myriad of metalinguistic terms (e.g. 'reported speech', 'present tense continuous', 'adverbs of frequency', 'irregular verbs' to name but a few) while they are barely able to string a few sentences together is asking the impossible. It is simply amazing, though, that children are actually able to reproduce these words, which are not only a bit of a 'mouthful', but also so abstract conceptually that they are definitely beyond the children's grasp.
 - (4) Learners should not be expected to speak in full sentences, especially when native speakers would not do so in the same situation either, e.g. 'What's your name? – Markus' or in 'What colour is the book? – Green'. Both answers are perfectly all right and usual in a native-speaking scenario, whereas answering the two questions in full – e.g. 'My name is Markus' and 'The book is green' – would come across as a bit over the top or unnatural.
 - (5) Grammar should always be taught in meaningful contexts and never in the abstract. Of course, sometimes it cannot be avoided, but basically children often ignore this type of input, as, cognitively speaking, they are simply not ready for this kind of 'grammarense' (cf. Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012; Lightbrown & Spada, 2013). Abstract grammar teaching may be absolutely fine for adults and in academic circles, in particular, but even adult students deserve an interactive approach revolving around games and activities every now and then. Furthermore, explicit grammar teaching is founded on the misconception that learners of a language can only make utterances after they have understood the grammar underlying them. However, a lot of language is acquired in chunks, especially initially, and any child can say 'What's your name?' without having to know that 'what' is a question word, 'is' is a form of to be, 'your' is a pronoun, 'name' is a noun and questions are generally governed by inverted word order. Grammar pundits may proceed this way when parsing sentences, but children generally do not. Similarly, primary children can say 'went' and use it in a proper context without ever having heard of the 'past tense', let alone 'irregular verbs'.
Even though 'grammar-translation' pundits may find this very hard to believe, grammar can be taught implicitly and quite successfully at that, using interactive games and activities in order to give the learners a natural incentive to experiment with the language that is immediately available to them. The approach should be 'learning by doing' rather than 'learning by analytical thinking'.
 - (6) Idiomacy, that is, everyday usage certainly outweighs matters of formal correctness, e.g. 'He don't' may deviate from the standard, but is nonetheless

- idiomatic, as it definitely occurs in some non-standard varieties of English (Hannah & Trudgill, 2002; Trudgill, 1997). ‘I like hamburger’, however, does not. Teachers, therefore, have to be very careful when it comes to correcting children’s mistakes, especially when speaking, as some of these would certainly be acceptable in less formal styles or varieties of English.
- (7) L2 teachers should not put too much emphasis on reading and writing, especially initially. Language is primarily a spoken medium and, as learning to speak a language is not exactly a question of great intelligence, as opposed to learning to read and write, you would definitely do the low achievers a great favour if you particularly practised speaking skills. Native speakers are given up to five years to develop their speaking skills in full before they are instructed how to read and write at primary school. L2 learners usually have to do both at the same time, which, admittedly, is a bit of a ‘juggling act’ and therefore very demanding.
- (8) Teachers should stop correcting children’s errors, especially when they are trying to speak. It is not only very impolite (native speakers would never dream of that!), it is also futile. Children in L1 and L2 are immune to corrections based solely on form and overly correcting their speech has a detrimental effect on their confidence and, even more so, on their fluency. Children have their own independent grammar systems that are very idiosyncratic at times and also very resistant to change. In other words, they can only produce forms they have acquired at a particular stage of learning, as there is a natural order of acquisition.
- It is, for example, a fact that the 3rd person singular ‘s’ is acquired last by both L1 and L2 learners and trying to teach it first, employing mnemonic devices such as ‘He, she, it ‘s’ geht mit’ will only succeed in expanding the children’s inventory of nursery rhymes, as they are not very likely to get it right from the beginning (Wiesinger, 2005). It will come eventually, though. Therefore, we must, under no circumstances, interrupt the learners’ natural flow of speech for the sake of a missing ‘s’. The same goes for other mistakes that are solely based on form. However, teachers should feel free to correct mistakes that impair the meaning of what is being said and therefore lead to misunderstandings, as native speakers would do the same, given the situation. By the way, there is ample room for corrections when it comes to writing (e.g. homework, compositions, essays), as writing is naturally governed by the standard and therefore follows explicit rules.
- (9) Children should be allowed to experiment with language in a relaxed learning atmosphere, as this generally boosts their confidence. Teachers should thus make their students unwind by means of games, contests, interactive activities and icebreakers, as these usually minimize the learners’ fears and take the pressure off. The ideal activity is the one that makes the learners so

- engrossed in whatever they are doing that they completely forget they are actually speaking a foreign language.
- (10) L2 teachers need not be word-perfect, but their lessons should. Apart from pronunciation, which should be spot on because children, particularly young ones, are like parrots when it comes to imitating words and pronunciation patterns, the teacher as a grammatical role model is totally overrated. In both L1 and L2 settings, we can observe a glaring discrepancy between input and output. To put it another way, the teachers' input is in stark contrast to the learners' output. There are simply no Austrian EFL teachers who would regularly drop the 3rd person singular 's'. Nonetheless, the learners keep omitting it. Similarly, teachers would consistently fire fully fledged questions at their learners; yet, learners' questions, as we have seen before, are formed by juxtaposing two or three words and adding a rising intonation. The same goes for other grammatical patterns, as learners' grammar is governed by their own independent grammar systems, which are radically different from the target language. Eventually, these systems will approximate the target structure or resemble it very closely, but first the learners' language will go through all the sequences and stages preordained by the natural order of acquisition, albeit at a very individual pace differing from learner to learner, as it were.
- Teachers can therefore relax in two respects. First of all, if their learners do not get certain forms right even after extensive stretches of very exhaustive drill and practice, it is only very natural. Just give them time. Besides, errors are most persistent in speech, because of the enormous amount of pressure on the part of the speaker, as speech always has to be spontaneous (Krashen, 1982, 1985, 1988). Learners will thus not be as focused on form as they, for example, would in gap-filling or cloze exercises, which, by the way, never revolve around meaningful contexts and only test the obvious, i.e. fixed patterns that have been drilled into the students' minds.
- Secondly, as hinted at above, teachers themselves need not be word-perfect. Having been trained in the academic style themselves, their minds will always be highly alert to grammatical correctness and thus keep monitoring their own speech like 'hawks'. As this monitor is always 'on' with speakers of a foreign language (cf. Hawkins and Towell, 1994; Krashen, 1982, 1985, 1988), it can seriously hamper their own fluency and render their speech a little stilted and unnatural. It is not the teachers' own language proficiency that guarantees successful language learning and acquisition – even though it is a massive bonus – it is the teacher as a mediator equipped with all the didactic and pedagogic skills required by the profession that does the trick. Carefully planned lessons allowing for a lot of lively and communicative interaction on the part of the learner and creating a relaxed learning atmosphere through well-conceived games and activities are much more at the core of the matter.

Besides, if EFL teachers' own L2 proficiency were anything to go by, all it took then to guarantee successful and swift language acquisition is to employ a great number of native speakers, put them in Austrian classrooms and children in Austria would be fluent in no time at all, which is of course educational 'humbug'.

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