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Introducing Linguistics to EFL Students through Linguistic Problem-Solving: A Proposal based on Universal Grammar Theory and Guided, Corpus-Aided Discovery

Iker Gutiérrez-Fandiño

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1. Introduction

The present paper is based on the hypothesis that universal grammar (UG) theory and guided, corpus-aided discovery (GCAD) can generate EFL undergraduate students’ active learning in the subject “Introduction to Linguistics”, essentially through linguistic problem-solving (LPS). The subject would be taught in L2 and its contents would be L2-oriented — hence, although some aspects of LPS exercises would be necessarily related to linguistics in general, the emphasis would be on English.

This paper seeks not simply to establish a connection between UG theory and GCAD but also to show in which ways can the integration of both result in an active learning of the contents of “Introduction to Linguistics”. The discussion in this short paper is completely conducted on the basis of the theoretical framework of UG and GCAD in the context of LSP learning.

2. Related work

There is relevant state-of-the-art research on the effectiveness of GCAD. Janssen, Westbroek & Van Driel (2013) and Girfanova, Anufryienka & Kavaliova (2020) prove that teaching-learning methods based on GCAD are highly efficient regarding students’ motivation, participation and understanding as long as the teacher actively gets involved in the discovery process.

Scholars such as Sadow (1983), Klippel (1984), Prabhu (1987), Skehan (1993), Estaire & Zanon (1994) and Bourke (1996) have long been advocating LPS as an active and effective means of internalizing second language grammar. They claim that the combination of ‘rule-generating’ and ‘rule-using’ makes the inductive-heuristic process more engaging and involving. More recently, Caprario (2013) has shown that students learn linguistics rapidly and accurately thanks to inductive, LPS-centered explicit instruction.

As for UG, Sadighi & Bavali (2008) posit that learners’ tacit knowledge of the grammar of their native language elicits intuitions about the grammaticality of sentences
generated in L1 and L2 — known as grammaticality judgments — and about the interpretation of sentences (ambiguity). UG works especially well in adult SLA, at a university level predominantly, owing to learners’ large command of L1\(^1\) (Bley-Vroman, Felix & Ioup, 1988; Crain & Pietroski, 2001).

### 3. GCAD and UG theory in LPS

As prior explained, UG and GCAD would be the main theories applied in the course — notwithstanding, many more theories would be indispensable to complete it methodologically speaking. It should be noted that the vast majority of SLA theories are not mutually exclusive but, quite the contrary, on many occasions the teacher has to be able to integrate different theories (consciously or unconsciously) to conduct the teaching-learning process successfully.

#### 3.1. Guided discovery

According to Huang (2008), teachers play a crucial role in GCAD learning in terms of facilitating access to corpora, helping students pose appropriate questions to solve doubts and ensuring that the focus remains on the learning objective. Bourke (1996) presents a bullet-point list of characteristics of the teacher’s role in GCAD-oriented LPS and, in a nutshell, he describes the pedagogical load as heavy and the role of the teacher as supportive and non-invasive.

Guided discovery implies social interaction: throughout the learner’s process of research and reflection on grammatical aspects of English, interaction not only with the instructor but also probably with peers will occur (Huang, 2008). Before and during the aforementioned discovery process, the teacher should provide students with careful guidance so that they can overcome every difficulty they encounter. In addition, the use of

\(^{1}\) It is worth recalling that one of the basic tenets of Chomsky’s (1986) UG theory is that many aspects of grammar are internalized at an early age, induced from the input. Nonetheless, the reason why UG is particularly accessible in adult language learning is that students are more aware of their knowledge, as well as more capable of understanding and questioning their linguistic presumptions.
selected L2 corpora in linguistic problems\textsuperscript{2} powerfully helps students ‘learn how to learn’ both independently and cooperatively, leads to the development of the research skill and promotes the transferability of language skills as well as the internalization of language-learning strategies (Hunston, 2002; Sinclair, 2004).

3.2. UG theory

Whereas SLA is fundamentally distinct from native language acquisition (NLA), studies that account for L2-L1 differences provide compelling evidence for assuming that L2 grammars are actually UG-derived (Hawkins, 2001). The UG theory establishes that there is a set of language principles and unfixed parameters that can be and should be contributed by learners, since the evidence each learner encounters in the LPS process enables her/him to fix the parameters into the new grammar (Cook, 1995). Interim hypotheses are therefore necessary in order to prove a presumption right or wrong. The success or failure of those attempts will lead the learner to infer the characteristics of the target language.

L1 cannot help the learner acquire those parts of grammar that vary from one language to another; yet, learning the exceptions — and understanding them, if possible — is itself a logical and common way of remembering what is different from the grammar of L1. Chomsky (1968) states that instructors should devote their efforts to creating a rich linguistic environment for the intuitive heuristics that human beings automatically possess. L2 learners should be provided with best-example data to formulate a rule out of those examples, because a rule produced by the very learners is destined to be understood and internalized.

In short, human beings’ innate grammatical competence and language transfer are the core pieces of evidence scholars provide to argue that UG is undeniably a significant basis for learners to understand the nature and logic of L2 grammar.

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\textsuperscript{2} In this paper, the term ‘problem’ in the NP ‘linguistic problems' refers to “a puzzle, question, etc, set for solution” (Collins, 2016, p. 1581).
4. Conclusions

UG and GCAD are of paramount importance in LPS: learners have to manage to follow the tracks and utilize all the available resources — that is, their innate grammatical competence and linguistic presumptions from L1 (UG) on the one hand, and the given data from L2 or from any other language\(^3\) (GCAD) on the other hand — to finally reach the solution to the exercise. Thus, students are encouraged throughout the process as there is a reward at the end of the path.

The instructor’s guidance, along with an active involvement in the discovery process, appears imperative, since it is notably beneficial in terms of social interaction, participation, motivation, student support and teacher’s control of maintaining the focus on the learning outcomes, among others. Additionally, building LPS exercises upon L2 corpora is a manner of exposing EFL students to comprehensible input.

To conclude, the key characteristics of this methodology so as to generate active learning are: an encouraging, challenging and maybe even exciting process, and an unexpected and uplifting reward — an exercise solution that the learner did not consider herself/himself capable of achieving and that consequently raises her/his confidence. All this can make the subject inviting for the learner, and once the student’s motivation is awakened, her/his active learning is ensured. By the same token, a good understanding of the contents of “Introduction to Linguistics”, taught in and oriented towards L2 (namely, English), will positively contribute to SLA.

\(^3\) It is common that linguistic courses become peculiarly attractive to learners as soon as they realize that they are capable of solving linguistic problems about any language. However, considering the already argued usefulness of utilizing English-language corpora, the presence of exercises about other languages should be limited.
References


