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Second language grammar learning: what is difficult and why?

What this research was about and why it is important

Second language (L2) grammar features often prove difficult to learn, but it is sometimes unclear why. A range of factors may explain this, including age, individual differences and learning environment. A further factor is the nature of the L2 grammar itself and its differences with a learner's first language (L1). This review article discusses three aspects which can make L2 grammar features hard to learn, with reference to evidence from existing research studies. The three main areas of discussion are summarised below.

Difficulty of meaning. Some grammar features express meanings that are particularly challenging to learn, because they are novel, i.e. do not exist in the learner's first language (L1), and express an abstract meaning that is difficult to infer when listening to / reading the L2. For example, articles (like the English 'a' or 'an') are not used in languages such as Chinese, Korean and Japanese, making them a difficult feature of English for learners of these L1s to learn. Similarly, gender (like the masculine 'el' and feminine 'la' in Spanish) tends to be difficult for L1 English learners, since this abstract concept does not exist in English. Even when learners receive focused grammar instruction, such features can cause ongoing and long-lasting difficulty.

Difficulty of form. In order to correctly express their intended meaning, L2 learners need to make choices about which individual grammatical forms to use and where to put them. While basic word order tends to be unproblematic after beginner level, there is evidence that basic morphology (e.g. inflections on nouns, verbs, and adjectives) can often go unlearned even after many years of L2 exposure. For example, even very advanced L2 learners of English can continue to struggle with third person -s. Learning L2 morphology can be particularly difficult for learners whose L1 (e.g. English) does not use a lot of morphology. Studies have demonstrated that focused practice can help learners to pay attention to such grammatical features that are otherwise easy for learners to overlook.

Difficulty of the form-meaning relationship. If the relationship between a grammatical form and its meaning is not clear, this may cause learning difficulty. Four relevant factors are mentioned:

1. **Redundancy.** The grammar form might not be necessary because the same meaning is conveyed by other information in the sentence. For example, in a sentence with a past tense verb ending, learners may understand the past tense context from an adverb (e.g., 'yesterday') and so not need to pay attention to the verb ending. When abstract and novel grammar features are redundant, they are particularly difficult to learn.
2. **Optionality.** In some languages, the use of certain grammar features may be optional. For example, in Spanish and Italian, the subject can, but does not have to be used with a verb. Whether it is used or not, the subject does not normally change the basic meaning of the sentence. These features may appear redundant, making learners less likely to establish the form-meaning relationship.
3. **Opacity.** Learners may have difficulty when the same form is used with multiple meanings. For example, in English, the -s morpheme is used to express third person singular verb agreement (she notes_s), the plural form of a noun (the notes_s) or possession (the note's_s date). The relationship between the form (-s) and its meanings is therefore not very clear.
4. **Frequency.** The frequency with which learners encounter and practice the grammar form may be important. If the transparency of the form-meaning relationship falls somewhere between the extremes of being very clear and very opaque, frequency (i.e. the number of encounters with the form and its meaning) may determine whether learners are ultimately able to acquire it or not.

Other suggestions.

5. The less salient a grammatical form is (i.e., the more difficult it is to see / hear, such as the articles 'le' and 'la' in French), the more difficult it may be to acquire.
6. Individual learner characteristics (such as aptitude and motivation) may also play a role in L2 grammar learning, although further research is needed in this area.

Implications for teaching.

Different instructional activities may be helpful for different grammar features with different sources of difficulty, e.g.:

- For grammar features that convey novel (potentially abstract) meanings, 'choose the right form' activities may be helpful.
- Frequent practice is important when there is difficulty of form.
- Association activities (e.g., phrase combination tasks) could be helpful for problematic form-meaning relationships.