* "Do you have two cloud?" The Role of Grammar in the Primary EFL Classroom

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Nella scuola elementare, l'insegnamento dell'inglese lingua seconda si basa su un approccio comunicativo. La grammatica esplicita non viene considerata un aspetto cruciale dell'insegnamento di una lingua seconda quando si tratta di un pubblico giovane. Molti insegnanti temono che, se viene permessa una comunicazione troppo spontanea, gli allievi acquisiscano delle strutture "sbagliate". Nonostante ciò, l'apprendimento implicito della grammatica (dell'interlingua) ha un ruolo importante in qualsiasi contesto d'apprendimento. I risultati della ricerca sull'acquisizione delle lingue seconde contribuiscono a rendere il loro insegnamento più efficiente. Basato su diversi esempi di produzioni degli alunni, questo contributo illustra un approccio "informato" dell'acquisizione delle lingue seconde e mostra come esso sostiene l'apprendimento della lingua in una prospettiva centrata sull'allievo.

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Introduction

> I have seen too many classrooms where learners are enjoying themselves on intellectually undemanding tasks but failing to learn as much as they might. The time available in busy school timetables for language teaching is too short to waste on activities that are fun but do not maximize learning. (Cameron, 2001: 2)

Lynne Cameron puts her finger on an important question about the role of instructed "early" foreign language learning. There has been an ongoing debate amongst researchers, practitioners and also the general public about the directions foreign language learning in primary schools should take. Both practitioners and researchers aim at a playful and child-appropriate approach to primary school foreign language teaching classrooms (e.g. Kubanek-German, 2003; Schmid-Schönbein, 2008). On the other hand, a goal-oriented approach to foreign language learning in primary school has been suggested (e.g. Mindt & Schlüter, 2007; Engel *et al.*, 2009). Today, there seems to be some consensus that foreign language learning in primary schools ought to be output-oriented in that learners should be brought into a position of at least being able to comprehend and produce basic target language communication at the A1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The question of what contributes to maximizing learning in foreign language teaching in primary schools and beyond has still not been fully answered.

One major field of discussion is the question of the role of grammar in the primary foreign language classroom. Most practitioners and politicians consider an active role for grammar instruction and learning in primary schools not to be child-appropriate. However, if we agree that foreign language learning in primary schools ought to be goal-oriented and child-appropriate, it can only be successful and sustainable if we consider basic findings from research on second language acquisition (SLA). One way of doing so would be a communication-based approach to foreign language teaching in primary schools. This approach not only draws from SLA-research but also fosters instructed SLA for each individual learner in the classroom (cf. Keßler, 2013).

In this paper we will explore the role of (interlanguage) grammar (cf. Keßler & Lenzing, 2008; Keßler & Plesser, 2011) in the primary school EFL classroom. First, we will briefly outline the concept of interlanguage and its development. In this context, we will demonstrate how the *Multiple Constraints Hypothesis* (Lenzing, 2013) contributes to a better understanding of the underlying processes of (instructed) foreign language acquisition. In a next step, it will be shown that the learners' interlanguage develops in a similar way both in natural as well as instructed settings. As this finding has repercussions for the teaching of languages, the impact of instructed SLA on the development of the learners' interlanguage grammar system and its importance for the teachability of languages (cf. Pienemann, 1995, 1998 and 2011) will be discussed.

Interlanguage development – Multiple Constraints Hypothesis – teachability:

It is an essential prerequisite for successful language teaching to gain insights into the processes underlying second language acquisition. In this context, research in SLA provides valuable information as it sheds light on the following questions: How does second language acquisition take place in the learner and what are the underlying psycholinguistic mechanisms?

It is here that research into developmental sequences in L2 acquisition is considered to be of crucial importance. Over the last decades, research findings in this field have provided considerable evidence for the existence of a universal developmental path every learner follows in her/his acquisition process (e.g. Wode, 1976; Clahsen, 1980; Meisel *et al.,* 1981; Pienemann, 1984, 1989 and 1998; Pienemann *et al*,. 2006; Keßler, 2006; Roos, 2007; Lenzing, 2013). This means that all learners of a second language acquire certain grammatical structures in a fixed and therefore predictable sequence. In this context, Ellis (2008: 113) states that "arguably, any theory of L2 acquisition will need to account for developmental patterns".

A theory that offers an explanation for the developmental sequences in L2 acquisition is *Processability Theory* (PT) (Pienemann, 1998). PT is a psycholinguistic theory of SLA that primarily focuses on the so-called "developmental problem", i.e. the question why learners follow a universal developmental path in L2 acquisition. The core idea underlying PT is that this path is determined by the architecture of the human language processor (Pienemann, 1998: 4). To be more specific, it is assumed that in order for a learner to be able to produce linguistic structures, specific processing procedures are needed that the learner acquires stepwise in the process of second language acquisition. It follows from here that a learner can only produce those linguistic structures that s/he can process, i.e. that the processor can handle at a given stage of development.

As regards the developmental sequences, in PT, six stages of acquisition are identified and applied to English as a second language. These are illustrated in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Stages of acquisition in English as L2 – Processability Hierarchy (adapted & modified from Pienemann, 1998; examples taken from Lenzing, 2013)

Syntax		Morphology	
Stage	**Structures**	**Stage**	**Structures**
6	Cancel Aux-2nd *Listen to what I say.*	6	
5	Aux-2nd. *What do you collect?*	5	3sg-s *The mouse plays volleyball.*
4	Wh-copula S (x) *What is your number?* Copula S(x) *Are there boots?*	4	Copula SV agr. *You are our clown.* Auxiliary SV-agr. *We're going shopping.*
3	Adverb-First *Today he stay here.* Wh-SV(O)-? *What you like?* Do-SV(O)-? *Do you have a sun?*	3	Plural –s (Det + N agr.) *Two ears*
2	SVO *The mouse play volleyball*	2	Plural –s *pets* Past –ed *played*
1	Words *Blue. Mouse.* Formulae *What's your name?*	1	

As can be seen in Table 1, the different stages of acquisition are characterised by specific morphological and syntactic structures that the learners are able to produce spontaneously at the respective level of development. The structural possibilities a second language learner has at a specific stage of development are restricted by the available processing procedures. What follows from here is that at the beginning of the second language acquisition process, learners produce predominantly formulaic utterances such as *What's your name?* or *What's your hobby?* (learner C03) and simple declarative sentences that follow a Subject-Verb-Object word order, as in *I like spaghetti* (learner C08) (examples taken from Roos, 2007 and from Lenzing, 2013). At a later stage (stage 3), learners are able to produce restricted question forms:

(1) *Do you like milk?* (learner C12)

(2) *Do you have two cloud?* (learner C16)

Instead of being afraid of learners' errors teachers should encourage their learners to actively produce language by going beyond the listen-and-repeat-patterns.

It is only at a more advanced level of language development that learners are able to actively produce more complex structures, such as question forms with an auxiliary in second position (e.g. *What do you collect?*) (cf. Table 1 above). It can be the case that these structures are produced by learners at a lower stage of acquisition. However, a close analysis reveals that they are not used productively but constitute instances of fixed formulae, as they occur without morphological and/or lexical variation (cf. Lenzing, 2013: 163ff.). A morphological feature that occurs rather late in the acquisition process is the 3sg-s, as the processing procedure required for the agreement between subject and verb is acquired at stage 5. Therefore, in early learner utterances the 3sg-s is missing, as in the examples below:
(3) *The mouse go to school.* (C06)
(4) *The mouse play guitar.* (C03)
(5) *The elephant sleep.* (C04)

What is important to note in the context of the foreign language classroom is that the limited options the L2 learner has at a specific point in development also lead to the production of non target-like utterances to express the learner's communicative needs. As far as morphology is concerned, this is illustrated in examples (2) - (5) above: as regards the question form *Do you have two cloud?* produced by learner C16, it can be seen that although the question form is syntactically target-like, the learner does not apply the plural –s, as she has not yet acquired the prerequisites to achieve agreement between the determiner *two* and the noun *cloud*. In a similar vein, in the utterance *The mouse go to school*, learner C06 is able to form sentences that adhere to an SVO pattern. However, he has not yet acquired the necessary processing procedure to match the relevant information (3rd person singular) between subject and verb in order to achieve agreement (cf. Lenzing, 2013: 204).
In her research focussing on beginning learners of English at primary school level, Lenzing (2013) shows that the mental grammatical system of early L2 learners is even further restricted. The constraints on processing also apply to the level of semantics. This means that early learners have problems expressing all the participants in the event they aim at describing (e.g. in example (8) the addressee *you* is missing). Furthermore, some of the utterances found in early learner language seem to be entirely idiosyncratic and the meaning can sometimes only be inferred from the context. The 'strange' utterances produced by beginning learners of English as L2 are illustrated in examples (6)-(8) below:
(6) *What's the spaghetti?* (= Do you like spaghetti?) (C02)
(7) *She likes you spinach?* (=Do you like spinach?) (C08)
(8) *What do like?* (= What do you like?) (C07)

At first glance, these utterances seem to be entirely unsystematic. However, the *Multiple Constraints Hypothesis* proposed by Lenzing (2013) offers an explanation for these seemingly diverse structures in terms of underlying limitations of the initially underdeveloped mental grammatical system. It is demonstrated that the 'strange' utterances occurring in early learner language all result from the processing constraints affecting both syntax and semantics.
As a consequence of the initial restrictions on processing, beginning L2 learners have only limited structural choices to express their communicative intentions. The study by Lenzing (2013) shows that the majority of the structures produced by learners at primary school level after one year of instruction consist of formulaic sequences and single words (Lenzing, 2013: 164). In the course of their acquisition process, the constraints on processing decrease as the learners gradually acquire the processing procedures necessary for the production of more complex structures. This leads to a decrease of formulaic sequences and single words in early learner speech after two years of instruction and to an increase in the production of canonical SVO structures (cf. Lenzing, 2013: 232).
The development from formulaic sequences, single words and idiosyncratic learner utterances towards more productive SVO-structures is exemplified in Table 2 containing learner utterances produced by learner C13 after one and after two years of instruction:

Table 2: Learner utterances after one and after two years of instruction (learner C13)

C13	Grade 3 (1 year instruction)	Grade 4 (two years instruction)
	What's your name?	My mouse play the guitar.
	What do you like?	I have a cat.
	I hobby?	My Max has a white T-Shirt.
	Blue.	Is a sun of your picture?
	Teeth.	Has Max a red trouser?
	Not woolly hat.	Max climb your {Löwen}(/) flowers {hoch.} (= Max is climbing on your dandelion)

It is important to note that although the structures produced by learner C13 after two years of instruction are not necessarily grammatically well-formed in terms of the target language, they nevertheless reflect a clear development in the learner's acquisition process from formulaic sequences and single words towards more productive utterances (cf. Lenzing & Roos, 2012; Lenzing, 2013).

Instructed Second Language Acquisition

In the previous passage we outlined the development of interlanguage and introduced the developmental stages for L2. A number of studies (e.g. Pienemann, 1985; Ellis, 1989; Lenzing, 2013; for a detailed overview see Keßler, Liebner & Mansouri, 2011) showed that the sequence of interlanguage development found in natural acquisition also applies to instructed settings. Needless to say that one can observe other differences between natural and classroom-based acquisition such as a greater emphasis on vocabulary learning or external factors such as motivation. These differences, however, do not affect the development of interlanguage grammars and therefore are beyond the scope of this paper.

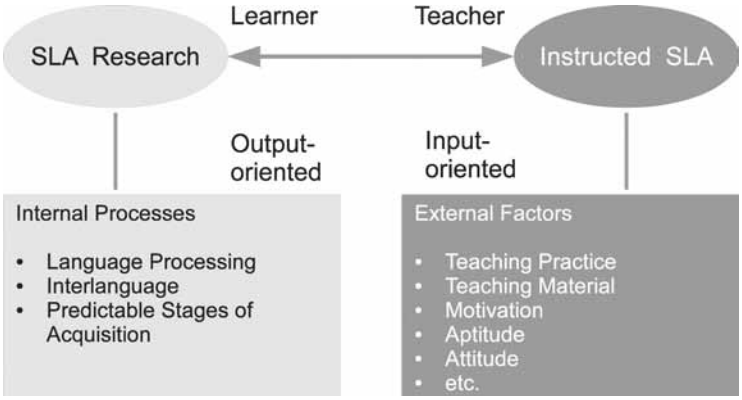
Any (foreign) language learning has to be understood as a gradual acquisition process of implicational (interlanguage) stages of the target language. In other words, all learners go through the same developmental stages, regardless of the setting of language acquisition. This sequence of target language development cannot be altered by instruction.

This might sound like bad news for language teachers who want to support their learners in their learning processes. However, this does not imply that all learners go through these stages in exactly the same way. Different learners produce different interlanguage variants of the target language and also may go through the stages more or less quickly. Teaching can make a great difference and support language learning immensely, especially if based on findings from SLA research: Pienemann (1985) asked whether language was teachable and Allwright (1984) posed the question "Why don't learners learn what teachers teach?" Keßler & Plesser (2011: 73) summarize the interface between SLA and grammar as follows:

> "SLA and grammar are related. In instructed acquisition, both fields complement each other in that SLA research provides the empirical basis for understanding interlanguage development. Grammar teaching in turn, applies SLA findings to the language classroom."

Figure 1 shows an integrated view of instructed foreign language acquisition and applies both to implicit as well as explicit learning of a target language.

Figure 1: An integrated view of instructed SLA (adapted from Keßler & Plesser, 2011: 72)



However, instruction does make a difference (cf. Doughty, 1991) as it can support foreign language learners by a) accelerating their learning process by teaching what they are ready to learn at a given point and b) promoting a more standard oriented interlanguage variety that enables the learners to also move to more advanced stages of development rather than getting stuck (stabilize) in their acquisition process.

From that perspective, Allwright's question quoted above is still relevant but could also be reversed: Why don't teachers teach what learners are ready to learn? (cf. Keßler, Liebner & Mansouri, 2011: 149). We will take a closer look at the implications for teaching in the next section.

What does this mean for teaching?

The question that arises in the context of foreign language teaching is whether the developmental path in L2 acquisition outlined above and the fact that learners acquire particular structures in a specific sequence can be altered/affected by teaching.

In this context, the implications of the *Teachability Hypothesis* – a subset of *Processability Theory* – are considered to be of particular importance. Already in 1984, Pienemann observed that "the teachability of languages is constrained by what the learner is ready to acquire" (Pienemann, 1989: 52; cf. Pienemann, 1984). In essence, the Teachability Hypothesis claims that the developmental path cannot be altered by foreign language instruction. In particular, the *Teachability Hypothesis* predicts that

- stages of acquisition cannot be skipped through formal instruction,
- instruction will be beneficial if it focuses on structures from the 'next stage'. (Pienemann, 1998: 250)

The *Teachability Hypothesis* has been confirmed by various studies (Pienemann, 1984, 1998; Ellis, 1989; Mansouri & Duffy, 2005; Keßler, 2006). In the framework of *Processability Theory*, it is argued that the reason stages of acquisition cannot be skipped is,

> because each stage requires processing procedures which are developed at the previous stage. 'Skipping stages' in formal instruction would imply that there would be a gap in the processing procedures needed for the learner's language. Since *all* processing procedures underlying a structure are required for the processing of the structure, the learner would simply be unable to produce the structure. (Pienemann, 1998: 13)

The insight that not everything that is taught in the foreign language classroom is at the same time learnable has important implications for early EFL teaching. Some of these implications will be addressed in the concluding part of our paper.

Conclusion – some implications for teaching

We started our paper with a quotation by Cameron in which she pointed out that the time for classroom-based language learning is not always used for efficient language learning. Many teachers, especially in primary school EFL classrooms, have been advised in training courses outside universities that spontaneous speech production by language learners at an early state of the learning process might be dangerous for the development of the L2 learner's grammatical system of the language to be learnt. Therefore, until today we can find many EFL primary school classrooms that stick to the concept of 'listen and repeat' rather than allowing for authentic communication between learners or between teacher and learner.

In our paper we outlined that learners in both natural and in instructed settings develop their (inter-)language skills gradually and systematically. Explicit grammar teaching is neither necessary nor in line with current curricula. Grammar develops implicitly, especially if teaching considers findings from SLA research. Instead of being afraid of learners' errors teachers should encourage their learners to actively produce language by going beyond the listen-and-repeat-patterns. Authentic communication will certainly lead to errors in language production, however, this is a fruitful way of putting learners into a position of noticing gaps between their own language production and the target form as presented by the teacher. If teachers teach what their learners are ready for they support their learners' interlanguage development. As was shown in Table 1 learners develop their interlanguage system gradually over time towards the target language, even without having been taught any grammar explicitly (also see Piske, 2006, who tracked a learner's EFL development from the initial state towards almost target-like usage).

Therefore, we consider it to be of great importance that teachers for (early) ELT be informed about the underlying processes in the language acquisition process. This knowledge helps them to develop realistic expectations about the pupil's language development. This, in turn, can contribute to a positive start to foreign language learning and maximize learning as requested by Lynne Cameron in her quotation above.

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