



## THE GENERATIVE APPROACH IN TEACHING ENGLISH: THE FEATURE AS A UNIT OF LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

This article has two main goals. The first is to summarize and comment on the current state of affairs of generative approaches to TEFL (GenTEFL). This discussion brings the readership of TEFL up to date on the questions driving GenTEFL agendas and clears up misconceptions about what GenTEFL does and does not endeavor to explain. We engage key questions, debates, and shifts within GenTEFL such as focusing on the deterministic role of input in language acquisition, as well as expanding the inquiry to new populations and empirical methodologies and technologies used. The second goal is to highlight the place of GenTEFL in the broader field of TEFL. We argue that various theories of TEFL are needed, showing that many existing TEFL paradigms are much less mutually exclusive than commonly believed (VanPatten & Rothman, 2014) – especially considering their different foci and research questions.

### INTRODUCTION

In the broadest sense, TEFL studies endeavor to describe and explain how nonnative languages are acquired, processed, and used. Inherent to the process of TEFL are transitional stages – interlanguage development – along a complex developmental continuum. The number of variables that affect TEFL are undoubtedly many, ranging from linguistic and cognitive to individual and societal. The explanatory power of TEFL theories crucially depends on uncovering which particular variables are influential at specific points of development and what their degree of influence is along the developmental continuum. Because there are so many aspects/variables to

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TEFL that can be the specific focus of particular theories, it is not surprising that there are so many approaches to TEFL. Each adds to the general field by isolating, describing, and explaining specific factors that influence linguistic performance and competence in adult nonnative language learners.

Given the comparative youth of TEFL research, it is even less surprising that paradigmatic misconceptions abound, fueling perceptions of incompatibility or mutual exclusivity among various TEFL approaches. To be sure, there are views across paradigms that are truly mutually exclusive; that is, either one or the other (and likely neither) is correct in absolute terms, but both cannot be because of their dichotomous nature. This is also true of competing theories within a paradigm. Specific theories within generative approaches to TEFL (GenTEFL) can be mutually exclusive (White, 2003). For example, models that claim full transfer at the initial stages of adult TEFL, such as full transfer/full access (Schwartz and Sprouse 1996), are mutually exclusive to theories maintaining very limited or no transfer of functional categories or features such as Minimal Trees (Vainikka & Young-Scholten, 1996). However, the actual level of incompatibility across paradigms, in our view, is much less than what is largely held true (Rothman & VanPatten, 2013) in large part because the questions each paradigm pursues are only partially overlapping. In addition to valid and appropriate scientific debates on the perception of significant incompatibility across various TEFL paradigms, there are historical reasons for blatant misunderstanding of what particular TEFL theories claim. Unfortunately, an inevitable consequence of this fact is that young scholars are sometimes trained without being afforded the opportunity to understand for themselves why approach X is supposedly so ill-conceived, and, by extension, why approach Y is superior in certain respects. Another unintentional by-product is that the newest generation of scholars is perhaps less prepared than its predecessor to fully appreciate the role of competing paradigms in the broader field of TEFL. Scientific progress runs the risk of being thwarted when one allows for misconceptions regarding false dichotomies to continue unabated. The goal of TEFL is shared across all scholars: to be increasingly more accurate in our descriptions and explanations. The history of scientific inquiry, regardless of the discipline, has shown that virtually no theory at any snapshot in time is completely correct. This is unproblematic because the goal of science is not to be “right,” but rather increasingly more accurate over time. In all likelihood, no current theory of TEFL is “correct” in absolute terms, but understanding competing theories accurately is the only way to perform the remit of science: A theory can only be meaningfully excluded from further consideration to the extent that it is properly understood.



The intended audiences of this article are graduate students and young scholars in the extended field of TEFL. It has several interrelated goals. First, we offer a state of the science of GenTEFL, orienting the readers to the main questions and trends in today's GenTEFL as opposed to questions of primary focus from 30 years ago. Second, we highlight where mutual exclusivity exists between GenTEFL and usage-based approaches to TEFL (Ellis & Larsen Freeman, 2009; VanPatten and Williams, 2014) and where we believe claims of incompatibility reflect misunderstanding more than anything tangible. Finally, we offer some insights into where we feel GenTEFL is likely to progress in the future and how this fits within the broader field of TEFL studies.

### **THE MAIN TENETS OF GenTEFL**

Like other cognitive-based theories of TEFL, GenTEFL has always focused on describing and explaining the system of implicit second language (L2) knowledge, especially how it comes to be represented in the mind and brain of the learner. The aim of much research in GenTEFL from its beginning in the 1980s has been to provide an understanding of the interplay between knowledge pertaining to all human languages (henceforth Universal Grammar or UG), knowledge that comes from the mother tongue (henceforth L1 transfer), and knowledge that comes from exposure to the target language (henceforth acquisition based on L2 input). In an effort to contextualize the past of GenTEFL studies, we provide a cursory summary of the two main questions that drove the research programs in GenTEFL for its first two decades. Clearly, we cannot do justice to everything worthy of discussion from the early years of GenTEFL. We sacrifice nuanced details in an effort to carve out space to dedicate ourselves to present-day GenTEFL and because there are high quality and detailed summaries of the early years in existence to which we refer the reader (White, 2003).

Akin to other mental systems that need external stimuli to unfold (e.g., vision), UG is argued to be a genetically endowed blueprint to the most generalizable facts about language; that is, it contains the linguistic information that is common to all human languages, labeled principles. As concerns linguistic learnability, the idea is that UG fills the gap left by what is learnable based on input and domain general cognition alone. Equipped with UG, child learners can narrow down the search space for language learning by limiting their hypotheses about the target language from the superset of all logical possibilities to the subset UG allows; that is, only those that characterize potential human grammars. In listing a priori the limits on what is and what is not a possible grammar, UG also identifies and restricts the parameters of grammatical variation between languages. Clearly, many domain-general cognitive, social, and computational principles shape linguistic development. According to the generative perspective, all these



factors in consort are the arsenal learners bring to the task of organizing and making sense of the input they encounter.

From its inception, generative language acquisition has been powered by the logical problem of language acquisition; namely, it defies logic that children should acquire their native language so fast and with so little trial and error, if the input that they are exposed to is uneven, inconsistent, and frequently underrepresents the knowledge they ultimately acquire. The argument is that acquisition processes are streamlined by domain-specific linguistic knowledge with which children are hypothesized to be born (Fodor, 1983; Pinker, 1995). Support for domain-specific linguistic knowledge comes from the Poverty of the Stimulus (PoS) argument (Schwartz, Sprouse, Herschensohn and Young-Scholten, 2013). The logic goes like this: If one can show that a child's knowledge of grammar extends beyond what could possibly be deduced from the input, even allowing for the operation of general cognitive principles, processing, and learning mechanisms, then such knowledge is left unaccounted for. If such unaccounted-for knowledge is arrived at by all learners despite the same improbability of extracting such knowledge from input or the gap being filled by domain-general cognitive mechanisms, then this constitutes good evidence that such a learner must have access to some built-in knowledge regarding what shape natural grammars can take.

From its outset, GenTEFL was also powered by the logical problem of language acquisition and by discussions of how it applies to the learning of second and subsequent languages in adulthood. Linguists who accept that UG continues to be accessible in adulthood and thus constrains L2 acquisition point to knowledge that is demonstrably present in L2 interlanguage grammars, but could not be acquired based on observation of the input alone, transferred from the native language, or taught explicitly, in the case of classroom learners. The learnability issues highlighted by the PoS argument extend beyond evidence-based but constrained acquisition to knowledge of what is unacceptable despite a bankruptcy of input cues that should lead the learner to deduce this.

The most important research question that dominated the field during the 1980s and at least the beginning of the 1990s was: Is there or is there not access to UG in adult TEFL? The dichotomous nature of this research question echoed the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) debates at the time: Is TEFL subject to a critical period or not? In other words, the generative linguistic equivalent to the critical period was essentially maturationally conditioned accessibility to UG. Gray areas or degrees of success in L2 acquisition were not easily accommodated by the theory. In Bley-Vroman's formulation (Bley-Vroman, Gass and Schachter, 1990; Bley-Vroman, 2009), TEFL was a fundamentally different process from native



language acquisition because L2 learners did not have direct access to UG after the critical period.

Empirical evidence from the 1970s and 1980s convincingly pointed in the direction of a critical period for child first language acquisition; that is, a reduced ability over time to acquire the functional L1 morphosyntactic system (Curtiss, 1988). Extending the notion of a critical period to apply to the acquisition of all new morphosyntax after puberty seemed logical, especially because the path and outcomes of adult L2 acquisition, partially like the case of very late acquired L1 acquisition (e.g., Genie and other “wild children”), also differ from child acquisition. However, it is certainly not the case that typical adult L2 acquisition presents similarly to very late first language acquisition in adulthood (Mayberry, 1994). It could be the case that a critical period (or lack of UG accessibility) pertains to all adults or that adult L2 learners are seemingly more successful than very late adult L1 learners because only the former can build off a previously acquired language. Alternatively, it might be the case that a critical period relates only to activating domain-specific information. In other words, having engaged UG in childhood, typical adult L2 learners continue to have access to UG in adulthood whereas the very late adult L1 learners did not activate UG prior to the critical period.

While it was assumed that UG was operable in child first language acquisition, constraining acquisition options and leading the child on a relatively error-free developmental path, determining whether adults had continued access to UG was not at all trivial; it was hotly debated. The answer revolved around establishing evidence of grammatical knowledge that went beyond what the language learners encountered, both in and outside classroom instruction. Starting in the 1990s, a line of research in GenTEFL concentrated on testing whether L2 learners did indeed acquire properties of the L2 incidentally and, specifically, if L2 learners acquire PoS properties. Early work such as that by Kanno (1997), Pérez-Leroux and Glass (1999), Dekydtspotter, Sprouse, and Anderson (1997), and Dekydtspotter, Sprouse, and Thyre (2000), among many others since, have showed that L2 grammars, despite significant differences from L1 grammars, instantiate universal linguistic properties that cannot be linked to transfer or accounted for by learning in the truest sense of the word (for an extended example, see the next section). Such evidence seriously questions any claims for a fundamental difference between L1 and L2 acquisition. Although it is still not agreed by all within GenTEFL that adults have direct access to UG, PoS knowledge in adult L2 acquisition constitutes rather strong evidence that adults continue to access UG past puberty. Differences between adults and children are explained on the basis of something other than UG accessibility.



At the same time, another factor played into that central question, partitioning the possible answers. Because the native language of any learner contains the information universally present in all human languages (i.e., the linguistic principles), clearly this information was available for transfer into the L2. Linguistic properties were divided into three types: universal properties, parameterized properties whose values were transferable from the native language, and values that were not transferable. Clearly, the parametric options depend on the L1-L2 pairings. For example, learning Italian null subjects would be easier if your native language is Spanish, unlike if it were English. The interplay of UG access and L1 transfer allowed for several positions: UG is fully accessible (Epstein, Flynn and Martohardjono, 1996; Schwartz and Sprouse, 1996; Vainikka & Young Scholten, 1994; White, 1989); UG is accessible through the L1 only (Bley-Vroman and Eubank, 1991); and UG constrains only L1 acquisition and is inaccessible in TEFL (Clahsen and Muysken, 1986; Meisel, 1997). In addition, as argued by Hale (Reference Hale1996), it may be exceedingly difficult to differentiate whether it is access to Minimalist UG or L1 transfer that guides L2A.

In summary, despite the observable fact that in some ways adult L2 acquisition is different from child L1 acquisition in path and ultimate attainment, the first two decades of GenTEFL research provided robust evidence that L2 interlanguage grammars instantiate abstract knowledge about the L2 that could not have been acquired on the basis of the L2 input, transfer from the L1 and/or instruction alone. Access to UG and the nature of L1 transfer were couched within this learnability context.

#### **MODERN GenTEFL WITHIN THE WIDER TEFL FIELD**

Now that we have provided an update of current GenTEFL theorizing, we direct our attention toward contextualizing GenTEFL within the wider field of TEFL. In doing so, our aim is twofold. First, we highlight how GenTEFL has expanded both the remit of variables and populations it considers to explain individual variation in TEFL, as well as the battery of methodologies it actively employs, corresponding to more sophisticated behavioral experimentation and especially psycho/neurolinguistic methods. Second, we explicitly make the case for why TEFL studies benefit from competing theoretical approaches and how GenTEFL is far more compatible with other theories than is commonly believed. Before we can address these two goals properly, we will acknowledge and discuss points of incompatibility with theories that deny a domain-specific linguistic capacity. In turn, we highlight what the explanatory benefits are from being open to the possibility that the mind is indeed preprogrammed specifically for the task of language acquisition.

**PSYCHOLINGUISTICS BRINGS NEW RESEARCH  
TECHNIQUES AND METHODS**



One criticism of GenTEFL we often hear relates to its experimental limits; that is, the perception that grammaticality judgment tasks (GJTs) are either overused or even exclusively used. The main issue seems to be that GJTs are not true reflections of how language is used. To start, it is simply not true that GenTEFL studies limit themselves to the GJT methodology. GJTs rarely stand alone, that is, they are simply part of a suite of tasks testing the same properties in varied ways. In addition to GJTs, GenTEFL studies have employed other behavioral tasks such as picture verification tasks, scalar judgment tasks, context felicity tasks, constrained/forced elicitation tasks, repetition tasks, open-ended elicitation tasks, and closed/fill-in the blank production tasks, to name just a few. Whole strands of GenTEFL research, for example studies on semantic interpretation, use predominantly truth value judgment tasks, among a variety of other interpretation tasks (Dekydtspotter, Sprouse and Swanson, 2001). Considering GenTEFL over at least the past 15 years, one would be hard-pressed to find published work that exclusively used GJTs.

Nevertheless, GJTs are indeed a staple within GenTEFL precisely because of GenTEFL's interest in trying to tap underlying representation as opposed to being uniquely concerned with variation at the level of production. To be sure, knowing what is produced by L2 learners is of great importance, hence the production measures we often include as part of our testing batteries. However, GenTEFL is equally interested in determining what L2 learners' intuitions are regarding ungrammaticality, semantic and contextual unacceptability. GJTs and truth judgment tasks are indeed a good way to determine not only what L2 learners know is acceptable, but crucially if they also know that certain structures are not acceptable in the L2, especially for properties that would be acceptable in their L1. Because GJTs isolate grammatical intuitions, they are a good means to determine the composition of L2 feature bundles (e.g., tease apart number from gender knowledge).

The relationship between psycholinguistics and generative grammar is a long one. In fact, it would not be a far stretch to say that the original idea of UG stems from the idea that there is a rich relationship between processing and grammatical representation. The alignment between psycholinguistics and GenTEFL is also not new, but it is fair to say that the upsurge in interest focusing specifically on L2 processing is recent. Nowadays, GenTEFL has not only aligned itself better with psycholinguistic inquiry, characterized by shifts in methodological design and experimentation techniques, GenTEFL is also using processing findings to address/make claims regarding debates on L2 competence. Take for example, the Shallow Structures Hypothesis (SSH) (Clahsen and Felser, 2006), which argues that L2 processing is qualitatively different from L1 processing because only the latter employs complete underlying



representations. The SSH is considered a mainstream theory of L2 psycholinguistics, in fact potentially the main promoter of the surging interest in L2 processing since the early 2000s (Keating and Jegerski, 2015). Because it most directly corresponds to claims of processing proper, its main thesis can be applied within multiple theories of linguistic representation. However, the SSH is predicated, at least in the minds of its authors, on a UG understanding of linguistic representation and mental computation. Returning to Sorace's (2011) Interface Hypothesis, we see yet another example of an important mainstream psycholinguistic proposal that is grounded in a generative understanding of language.

With the enhanced interest in psycholinguistics in recent decades, methodologies employed by GenTEFL scholars have expanded as well. Eye-tracking is now used abundantly by GenTEFL scholars (Clahsen, Balkhair, Schutter and Cunnings, 2013; Cunnings, Batterham, Felser, Clahsen, VanPatten and Jegerski, 2010; Hopp, 2013; Kim, Montrul, & Yoon, 2015). As described earlier, the Interpretability Hypothesis claims that uninterpretable features – those that are purely grammatical in nature, or core syntactic features – not instantiated in the L1 will not be acquirable in a nativelike manner by L2 learners. Alemán Bañón et al. proposed that if the Interpretability Hypothesis is correct, then one should expect L2 learners to show qualitatively different processing for the purportedly unacquirable L2 features. Because English has grammatical number but not grammatical gender, the predictions of the Interpretability Hypothesis would be that the L2 learners might show evidence of nativelike processing for number violations, but not for grammatical gender violations. The study showed that by advanced stages of L2 acquisition, English learners of Spanish do have qualitatively similar processing for both gender and number violations. Specific results are of less consequence to our point, which was to provide an example of how psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic methodologies are being used in GenTEFL and in ways that add to theory-internal debates as well as contribute to psycholinguistics more generally.

Another long-standing idea is being reinforced with evidence from psycholinguistic findings recently: that perceptions of L1–L2 acquisition differences may in part be due to processing effects; that is, while learners' grammatical representations are indeed in place, their slower and labored processing produces an impression of a faulty grammar (as in the case of the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis). Experimental support comes from Hopp (2013), who has argued that differences in the input between natives and L2 learners can lead to unstable lexical representations of L2 gender and problems with gender assignment lexically, hence slower lexical access provides the semblance of errors even if competence is grammatically constrained. In turn, lexical effects may produce nontarget





processing of the syntactic aspects of gender agreement, such as predicting what is to come next in the sentence. Thus, the long-standing debate on whether L2 learners are fundamentally different from native speakers is seen in a new light: While L2 competence may be fundamentally similar, L2 processing might not be, or might not be as efficient (Kaan, 2014).

Furthermore, the conventional division of labor between underlying linguistic representations and the parser has been reconsidered in the parsing-to-learn proposal that the parser is in a symbiotic relationship with the language acquisition device. In essence, the idea is that learning happens through processing failure. The incremental structural analysis of the input and the subsequent reanalysis, when the input cannot be parsed by the interlanguage grammar, provide the triggers for grammar acquisition. This is a potent transition theory that has a high potential to explain how learners move from one stage of knowledge to another.

#### **CONCLUSION: A PLACE FOR MULTIPLE THEORIES IN TEFL**

Having traced the trajectory of GenTEFL over four decades, we now shift to specifically carving out its place in the broader study of TEFL theory. In recent years, it has been argued that TEFL studies as a macrofield benefits from a multiplicity of approaches, precisely because a single approach, at least at present, is not equipped to adequately address all the dimensions pertinent to TEFL (Rothman, VanPatten and García-Mayo, 2013). To name a few, there are social, individual, and cognitive aspects to TEFL. And while no one denies that these aspects interact in nontrivial ways, it is not necessarily the case that paradigm-internal priorities and/or methodological expertise allow for equal treatment of all aspects. This fact might reflect more the relative youth of TEFL studies than anything else; however, it should be fairly uncontroversial to claim that at present theories with a primary focus on the social side of acquisition will not be able to engage as fully with the cognitive aspects of acquisition to the same extent that cognitive theories do and vice versa. The questions posed by each, all worthy of serious inquiry, are simply different. None are better or worse and none should be privileged as all contribute to the puzzle that is TEFL. The primary imperative of each paradigm is to test theory-internal proposals of a select domain of TEFL, discard proposals through scientific inquiry along the journey and arrive at a place of relative agreement. When theory-internal proposals have been exhaustively tested and paradigm-specific consensuses are more solid, transitional theories of TEFL that incorporate all aspects might be possible. The field is simply not there yet.

As we hope is clear at this point, because GenTEFL (as well as all other cognitive approaches) focuses on only some aspects of the entirety of the TEFL process, it is not incompatible with other foci studied by other traditions. For example, GenTEFL says nothing about social dimensions of language. However, we know that the sociology of language is a variable



that interacts with mental representation. Minimally, language ideologies, sociolinguistic variation, language policies, and linguistic identities affect access to and quality of language input, the external ingredients needed for grammatical growth. Whatever the case, there is little proposed by sociolinguistics and generative grammar that is a priori mutually exclusive. Having a genetic component to linguistic computation and an understanding that language is a by-product of human interaction are not at odds. The question does not have to be nature versus nurture, why can it not be both? And so, TEFL approaches that focus on motivational aspects, for example, need not run in contrast to any tenet of generative linguistics. In fact, we would argue they are completely complementary.

GenTEFL is part of the cognitive side of TEFL, and so if there are tangible incompatibilities between theories of TEFL then they should be found across competing cognitive theories. Here too, we suggest that there is much less mutual exclusivity than most – on any “side” – might agree. As it pertains to acquisition of the lexicon and even acquisition of syntactic properties that clearly have correspondent cues in the input, the data are neutral to the tenets that seemingly divide us, that is, the logical question of acquisition. To give a tangible example, there is great work examining the acquisition of verbal argument structure that could be labeled as strictly generative (Juffs, Reference Juffs, 1996) and strictly usage-based (Ellis, Römer and O’Donnell, 2016). Of course, the methodological approaches differ across studies due mostly to paradigm tradition. While generative scholars investigate acceptability and interpretation through eliciting judgments, usage-based scholars predominantly look at corpora and linguistic production. This is so because GenTEFL scholars are primarily concerned with learners’ mental representations, while usage-based scholars are more concerned with what learners do with language, which in turn is taken to reflect what they know. The interpretations of findings are also shaped by the working assumptions, terminology, and specific questions of the respective paradigm. However, a neutral reading of the conclusions shows they are not so different. The bottom line in each case is that L2 learners can acquire novel argument structure and the usage-based approaches even show how this reflects nicely the probabilistic contingencies of the input in language use/exposure.

Our point is that much, maybe most, of what we study under cognitive approaches cannot address the innateness question profitably. Usage-based approaches nicely explain acquisition where lexical learning is involved, including functional morphology learning. Generative approaches do better, in our view, at explaining the acquisition of subtle complexities of language that do not find direct cues in the input or even indirect cues that should lead to inductive learning. Moreover, generative approaches are better at connecting properties that are superficially



unrelated but underlyingly linked to the same parameter, for example, properties that emerge at the same time in development (Snyder, 2001), precisely because the granularity of the formal theory employed can account for this and, in fact, even predicts this. There remain plenty of properties that allow a head-to-head framework comparison, see specifically Shantz (2017) and Zyzik (2017) for some good examples. Where we differ incommensurably is in delineating the parts of language that are claimed to be truly universal and otherwise unacquirable, that is, PoS properties illustrating the logical problem of acquisition. Some claim that PoS properties simply do not exist (Evans, 2014; Pullum and Scholz, 2002). We take that criticism seriously. But as we pointed out, more than claiming PoS does not exist is needed. What one needs to show, to eradicate once and for all the very notion of PoS, is to provide alternative explanations for how properties described in the literature as PoS are acquirable. The descriptions of PoS structures are not in question, what is in question is that the input in consort with domain general cognition is not sufficient to acquire these properties (O'Grady, 2008).

Our point is simple: Many people working on acquisition from either a generative tradition or a usage-based position currently do not appreciate that the area of mutual exclusivity is as small as we have claimed here. The good news is that the strict divide between the so-called sides of cognitive approaches to TEFL is more a matter of tradition and mutual misunderstanding than tangible. Much work can be done at the crossroads of where data are neutral. No one needs, therefore, to compromise core beliefs to begin to engage in interdisciplinary research where our views are indeed not mutually exclusive. Combining efforts means that the results of such research should be more easily understandable and satisfactory to all sides, no matter what the results seem to favor in the end. GenTEFL scholars, in our view, have much to offer other TEFL subfields as we hope is evident by now, and other subfields of TEFL have much to offer GenTEFL in terms of methodology and beyond. For example, usage-based theorists have teamed up with great success in recent years with corpus linguists who hold the keys to a methodology crucial to revealing facts about language (Wulff, 2016). We see no reason why the same could not be true of GenTEFL with other traditions of linguistics. Of course, until we have crystal clear evidence that is truly irrefutable, we will continue to agree to disagree on nontrivial points. But disagreement should not be a bottleneck to progress for the broader TEFL field. It is our hope, that this invitation is the beginning of many collaborations that help move the broader field of TEFL forward, while respecting the centrality of linguistic theory and the contributions that each subfield makes in its own right.

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