



REVISITING UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

Ambreen Afzal

M.Phil Scholar, NCBA&E Alhamra University Bahawalpur

Email: m.afzlkhankanju786@gmail.com

Roman Yahya

M.Phil Scholar, NCBA&E Alhamra University Bahawalpur

Email: romanromu8@gmail.com

Quratulain

M.Phil Scholar, NCBA&E Alhamra University Bahawalpur

Email: sajidrasool1053@gmail.com

Ayesha Inam

M.Phil Scholar, NCBA&E Alhamra University, Bahawalpur

Email: ayeshaslam28@gmail.com

Dr. Muhammad Arfan Lodhi*

***Corresponding Author**

Higher Education Department, Punjab

Email: samaritan_as@hotmail.com

Abstract

The relationship between Universal Grammar (UG) and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) remains one of the most influential and contested areas in contemporary linguistic research. Grounded in Chomsky's theory of innate linguistic knowledge, this concept paper critically examines the extent to which Universal Grammar continues to influence adult second language learning. The study aims to explore the role of UG in SLA, investigate its relationship with interlanguage development, and evaluate competing perspectives regarding adult learners' access to innate grammatical principles. Adopting a qualitative conceptual research design, the paper synthesizes classical and contemporary scholarship on UG, including the Full Access, Partial Access, and No Access Hypotheses, as well as related concepts such as parameter setting, the Poverty of the Stimulus argument, the Critical Period Hypothesis, and interlanguage theory. The review reveals that second language learners construct systematic and rule-governed linguistic systems rather than acquiring language through imitation alone. Evidence from generative, cognitive, and neurolinguistic research suggests that while adult learners may not access Universal Grammar in the same manner as children acquiring a first language, innate linguistic constraints continue to shape grammatical development and interlanguage formation. At the same time, factors such as first-language transfer, cognitive maturation, instructional input, and sociocultural context significantly mediate language learning outcomes. The paper argues that the most convincing contemporary position is neither complete accessibility nor total inaccessibility of UG, but rather a dynamic interaction between innate linguistic mechanisms and domain-general cognitive processes. The study contributes to ongoing theoretical discussions in SLA by providing a comprehensive synthesis of foundational and recent research, highlighting the continued relevance of Universal Grammar while acknowledging emerging challenges from usage-based, cognitive, and neurolinguistic approaches.



Future interdisciplinary research integrating generative linguistics, cognitive science, and language pedagogy is recommended to further clarify the nature of UG accessibility in adult second language acquisition.

Keywords: *Universal Grammar, Second Language Acquisition, Interlanguage, Generative Linguistics, Critical Period Hypothesis, Linguistic Competence.*

1. Introduction

Language is one of the most remarkable human abilities, and linguists have long tried to understand how we acquire it so naturally and efficiently. One of the most influential ideas in linguistics is Noam Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar. He argued that humans are born with an innate language faculty, allowing them to learn any language. This theory challenged behaviorist views, which saw language learning as just imitation plus environmental exposure. Universal Grammar holds that all human languages share certain basic principles and structures. Children pick up complex grammatical systems even when the input they receive is limited — that led Chomsky to propose the "Poverty of Stimulus" argument. According to this idea, environmental exposure alone can't explain how we acquire language so quickly and systematically. Therefore, humans must have an internal language-learning mechanism built in. The application of Universal Grammar to Second Language Acquisition, or SLA, has become a major research area. There is continued debate as to whether Universal Grammar is available to adult learners during acquisition of a second language. The papers aim to review the relevant literature to examine these competitive perspectives.

1.1 Rational of the Study

Despite extensive research on the relationship between Universal Grammar (UG) and Second Language Acquisition (SLA), scholars have yet to reach a clear consensus regarding the extent to which adult learners access Universal Grammar during second language learning. While the Full Access Hypothesis garners support, alternative perspectives advocate for either the Partial Access or No Access Hypotheses. Scholarly opinion on this matter remains divided. Existing research prioritizes theoretical debate over systematic evidence regarding the operation of UG in adult second language acquisition. The relationship between Universal Grammar and interlanguage development warrants further investigation, given the inconsistent findings reported in prior studies. A significant gap remains in understanding the precise role and accessibility of Universal Grammar in adult second language learning. The goal of this study is to tackle this gap through a critical review and analysis of the existing literature on Universal Grammar and its role in Second Language Acquisition.

1.2 Research objectives

1. To understand the relationship between Universal Grammar (UG) and Interlanguage
2. To examine the role of Universal Grammar in second language acquisition
3. To investigate whether learners have access to Universal Grammar while learning a second language
4. To analyze the effects of Universal Grammar and parameter settings on second language acquisition
5. To review the theories related to Universal Grammar, including the Full Access, Partial Access, and No Access Hypotheses

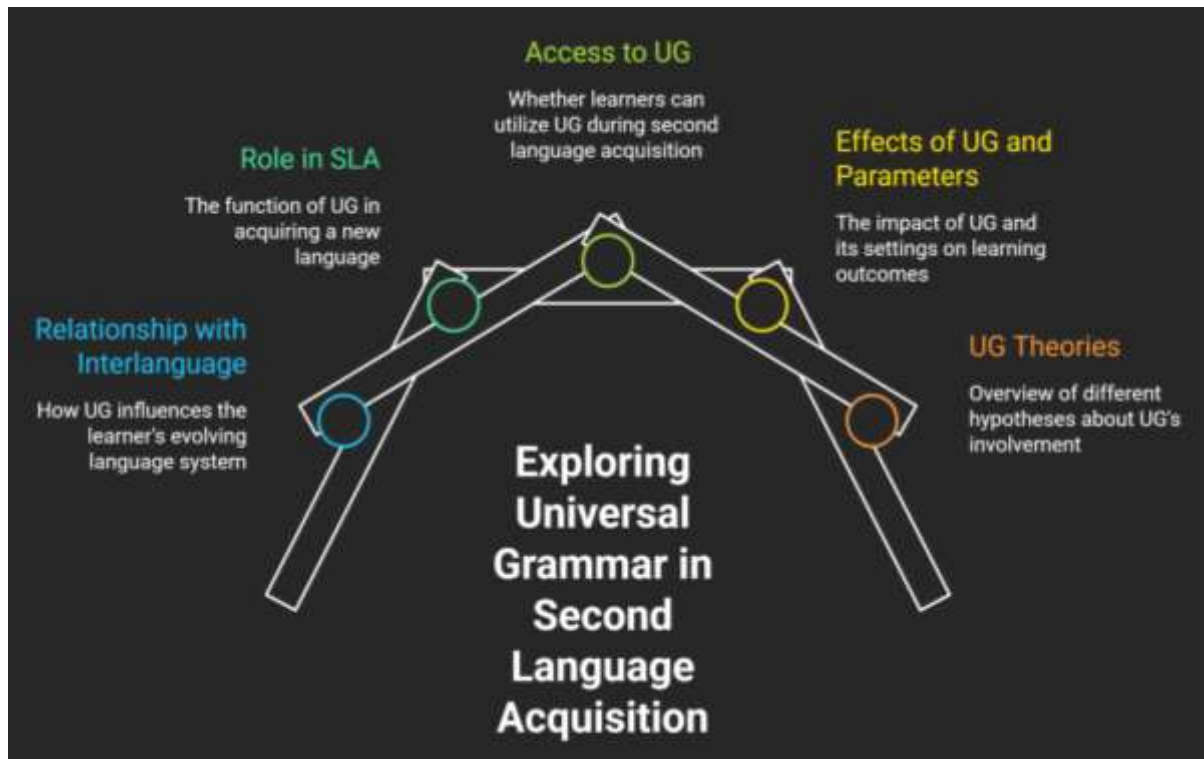


Figure 1. Rational of the Study

1.4 Research questions

1. What is the role of Universal Grammar in second language acquisition?
2. How much access do adult learners have to Universal Grammar when they are learning a second language?
3. How does Universal Grammar affect interlanguage development?
4. How do the Full Access, Partial Access, and No Access hypotheses explain adult learners' access to Universal Grammar?

1.5 Significance of the study

This study is academically significant because it contributes to a better understanding of the role of Universal Grammar in second language acquisition. It emphasizes the extent to which adult learners can utilize their innate linguistic abilities while learning a new language. Furthermore, the study may prove beneficial for teachers, researchers, and curriculum developers, as it can provide valuable insights into the cognitive and linguistic processes involved in language learning.

2. Literature Review

Noam Chomsky introduced Universal Grammar, or UG. This theory proposes that humans are born with an innate ability for language. It enables individuals to learn language in a natural and efficient way. Chomsky (1981, 1995) claims that all languages share universal principles and parameters that guide how we learn to speak. This idea has been widely accepted for first language acquisition. Children pick up complex grammar structures fast, even with very limited



input. That is the "poverty of stimulus" argument. Researchers then started asking if this applies to second language learning too. Can adult learners still tap into that built-in grammatical knowledge? Different scholars have taken different sides on whether UG is accessible in SLA. White (2003) argues that adult learners still show sensitivity to grammatical rules like structural dependency and syntactic constraints. That suggests they still have access to UG. Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) proposed the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis. It says learners bring knowledge from their first language but also keep access to UG when learning a second language. But some researchers think this access fades with age. Long (1990) stressed the Critical Period Hypothesis.

Chomsky (1981, 1995) introduced the concept of Universal Grammar (UG), which is an innate linguistic system that allows humans to learn language. The theory postulates that there are universal principles and parameters common to all languages that govern language acquisition. The framework has been widely used in research on first and second language acquisition. White (2003) claims that adult second language learners are still sensitive to grammatical constraints, and suggests that Universal Grammar is still available during second language acquisition. Her findings lend support to the idea that learners are able to acquire complex grammatical knowledge in addition to the linguistic input. In addition, the article includes further research evidence and opposing viewpoints regarding the role of Universal Grammar in second language learning. Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) proposed the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis, whereby learners transfer knowledge from their first language but retain access to Universal Grammar. This hypothesis explains how learners reorganize their linguistic systems in the process of acquiring a second language.

In contrast to this, the Partial Access and No Access Hypotheses believe that adults can face difficulties while accessing Universal Grammar. Both these theories highlight the importance of first language transfer, cognition, and learning strategies in the acquisition of a second language. The work of Tao Parodi, Michael Thomas and Larry Selinker are among the key studies in generative linguistics that are referred to and examined in this review. This work is concerned with such issues as interlanguage, parameter setting, reflexives and sentence structure. Their research demonstrates that learners construct their second language systems in an organized way. Principles are the foundational rules that apply across all languages. Parameters are the unique aspects that differ from one language to another. When you learn a language, you're essentially figuring out these parameters through exposure. For example, some languages allow sentences to exist without a subject, while others do not. One of the main ideas in this discussion is the Poverty of the Stimulus. This concept suggests that learners can grasp certain language rules without needing explicit instruction. It implies that we have some inherent grammatical knowledge already stored in our minds. Systematic Interlanguage is the main and important concept in SLA. As learners create an interlanguage—a sort of bridge between their first and second languages they start to understand the language system they're developing. They might make mistakes, but those errors indicate they're actively trying to formulate rules. When it comes to Morphology and Syntax, if students are familiar with verb endings, they can correctly use verbs in their sentences, ensuring the endings match appropriately. This shows that grammar rules are stored in our memory.



Students pay attention to how words are used and their meanings within sentences. For instance, they might say “it happened” as they learn the logical structure of grammar. Research indicates that learning a second language is a creative mental process rather than mere imitation. Students build their own grammars based on universal principles, and the mistakes they make are a natural outcome of how the human mind organizes language. The concept of Universal Grammar offers an alternative explanation for the similar errors made by learners from different linguistic backgrounds. Even in adulthood, second language acquisition is still influenced by universal grammar. This framework helps learners grasp complex grammar rules with minimal input. The theory posits that humans possess an innate language-learning system that aids in acquiring new languages. Future research could explore how social and environmental factors shape this process. Other researchers have not yet been able to come up with a single focus for determining the nature of adult language acquisition (Susan and James on Language Acquisition) and as a result, these researchers also do not have a consensus on how best to acquire or use UG when acquiring language as an adult. Many of these studies exhibit such vast differences from one another that it indicates that additional research must be completed to provide further clarification on how adults acquire language. Learners make “errors”: they produce or understand language in ways which diverge from that of native speakers. But, as first claimed by Selinker (1972), learners’ errors are systematic, which points to a rule-based system. This is Selinker’s idea of an interlanguage, a grammatical system in its own right, as opposed to “habits” taken over from the (contrastive analysis hypothesis; Lado, 1957) or a random collection of “errors.” The study of in the UG framework adopts the basic idea of interlanguage. Are systematic, which indicates that the system is rule based Clustering of Morphological and Syntactic Properties One way of answering this question is by observing specific phenomena in an L2 and testing whether they are compatible with a UG analysis. There are numerous examples of studies with this focus. A straightforward case is the clustering of morphological and syntactic indications of finiteness on the verb. Finite verbs are marked for agreement, tense, or both, depending on language-specific properties. Finite and nonfinite verbs have different distributions in the sentence. This is clearly visible in English (or German or French) in that finite verbs, marked for person agreement and tense, precede negation, while this configuration holds for a long-distance reflexive like Japanese *zibun*, which can be c-commanded by a noun phrase (NP) subject of a matrix clause. Locally binding anaphors can have subject or non-subject antecedents. But the c-command configuration does not hold in a bi-clausal sentence like (12), if the anaphor *zibun* is interpreted as having a non-subject antecedent outside its own clause (Thomas, 1995). Given the facts just described, the Japanese input is under-informative for a learner. While it is clear that *zibun* can bind a long-distance antecedent, the input does not provide clear evidence about the constraints on interpretation, namely, that *zibun* can only refer to a long-distance subject. The question arises whether learners of Japanese whose native language does not allow long-distance binding can learn the properties and disallow binding with a non-subject in a matrix clause. Thomas (1995) tested this question with English learners of Japanese at two proficiency levels, low and advanced. The test methodology was a truth-value judgment based on the context provided by a sequence of pictures accompanied by written utterances. Each scenario was followed by a statement which the participants had to evaluate as true or false. There were four items per condition. The aim was to find out whether learners of Japanese that



the long-distance antecedent should be a subject. The syntax semantics interface is another domain in which native speakers have knowledge. Thomas Raymond. 2013. Translation in Foreign Language Pedagogy: The Rise and fall of the Grammar Translation Method. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University findings the dissertation looks at how the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) became widely used in teaching foreign languages and eventually became less important. It says that modern teaching methods, like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), often dislike translation because they link it only to GTM. The study explains that some early language teachers were heavily influenced by GTM, while others used it only partially. It also shows how the Reform Movement and the Direct Method helped move translation out of language classes. Universal Grammar is the theory that we are born with an innate capacity to learn language. This review describes whether and how it facilitates second language acquisition and if it is still accessible to adults. It contrasts views of Otto Jespersen and Noam Chomsky and argues that UG may guide learners although a first language still influences learning. UG has two components: principles (the fundamental aspects common to all languages) and parameters (the options which vary from one language to another). Learning a second language is turning these settings around. Three positions have been identified: no access, full access, and partial access to UG. Errors of learners are frequently shaped by their first language, but nonetheless, they maintain the general rules of the language.

Researchers have sought out genuine poverty of the stimulus' cases. In other words, both of the following must hold (White1990) the phenomenon in question must be determined by the L2 input. That must not be something that could have been acquired without recourse to universal principles, by simple observation of the L2 input, by frequency effects, or on the basis of instruction, analogical reasoning, etc. The phenomenon in question should work differently in the L1 and the L2. If learners show evidence of subtle and abstract knowledge, we want to exclude, as much as possible, the possibility that such knowledge is obtained via the grammar alone. Indeed, this double requirement (not obvious in L2 input; not present in L1) has been applied as a kind of formula to much UG-SLA research (see Schwartz 1997 for related observations). However, the requirement that L1 and L2 differ in the relevant respects becomes harder and harder to achieve, in that many properties of UG will of necessity manifest themselves in the L1 in some form (see Hale 1996). Nevertheless, if the L1 and L2 differ in terms of surface properties, then we can at least rule out transfer at this level as the sole explanation of what is going on. One of the main components of verb grammatical rules, subject-verb agreement plays an important role in the use of language. How to properly use agreement becomes a parameter to measure the interlanguage proficiency of English as Foreign Language learners (EFL). The qualitative method is applied to analyze the data in Table 1 toward the errors of subject-verb agreement made by L2. This study divides the errors into three main kinds of quantity difference of subject-verb agreement, and their statistic results are in Table 1.



Table 1 Combined Statistical Table.

Error Type	Counts	Proportion
Breaking grammatical agreements	25	80.6%
Breaking notional agreement	3	9.6%
Breaking Proximity	3	9.6%
Total	31	100%

Agreement refers to the requirement that the forms of two or more words which stand in specific syntactic relationship with one another should be characterized by the same paradigmatically marked category. The syntactic relationship includes a pronoun agreeing with its antecedent, a verb agreeing with its subject, etc. On the other hand, actually in Chinese the rules are different from those in English. Therefore, some Chinese learners often simplify the rules, and usually make mistakes in this aspect. Some examples are selected from the selected text as follows. (1) Breaking grammatical agreement: Geylang Methodist School is called. Correct form: It was called Geylang Methodist. 2) Breaking notional agreement: I go to Chinese Church when I was small. Hm. English I go now. Correct form: I went to Chinese Church when I was a child. Hm. I go to English Church now. (3) Breaking proximity: There's number of schools there. There's also got churches there. Correct form: There are a number of schools. There are also many churches. Based on the errors of subject-verb agreement identified from the three aspects, the verbs commit errors can be mainly divided into lexical and copular verb. Furthermore, the most of errors about subject-verb agreement occur in the breaking of grammatical agreement, which accounts for over 80%. According to English grammar, verbs should have inflectional changes (plus -s) when a nominal subject is singular and remain its original form when the nominal subject is plural. Generally speaking, the errors that the Chinese-English learners tend to use the original form of lexical verb instead of using its singular form accordingly are caused by the negative effect of mother tongue since there is no inflectional verb change in Chinese language. From subject perspective, much emphasis has been put on the verb of error in the subject-verb agreement. However, the role of a subject played in the choice of the proper verb form should never be ignored. The main reason for the fact that Chinese learners are more aware of the singular and plural forms of pronouns than those of general nouns lies in the complexity of the rule of the target language.

The rule of nouns, including general, abstract, countable nouns and so on is more complex than the rule of pronouns. UG but also evidence of a specific language to acquire language. The child needs to listen to sentences in a particular language to know how to fix the rules of subject, verb and object. Evidence received by a child can either be positive or negative. Positive evidence is where the child hears actual sentences and learns the subject, and object order (White 1991). Negative evidence, on the other hand, is divided into two, direct and indirect negative evidence. Direct evidence is where the child is corrected on his mistakes by an adult. Indirect evidence is where a child fails to hear something in the language. The non-occurrence of a specific order of parameters is negative evidence that the order of parameters in question should not be used in that language. The acquisition of L1 mainly relies on positive evidence since children receive little negative evidence in the form of corrections from adults. As a result, if UG is a present



from the beginning of life, then all human's languages should follow the principles of language. Grammar is a representation of the linguistic knowledge a person has regardless if the person is three years or thirty years old (White 2003). Following this assumption, despite many principles being absent from interim grammar, the rules present do not break the principles. Therefore, by using the same principles of language, a Spanish child will construct grammar in Spanish while an English child will form English grammar. These two grammars represent different choices all of which are under the guidelines of UG. In other words, it is a different application of similar principles of linguistics but in response to the different environments in which the children were raised (Phinney 1987).UG plays a major role in learning a second language. First, it should be noted that experience is an essential requirement for learners to fix the parameters of grammar. However, the learner also has to learn the peripheral aspects of the language that do not align with UG. Nonetheless, most minds prefer to follow rules that are based on what the learner already knows (Chomsky 1982).Following the rules that are already provided is the easiest way out for the learner since learning only needs to be triggered. For example, when the learner listens to people speaking the new language around him, he will immediately know how to fix the subject, verb and object parameters into a sentence. In summary, the learner's mind fails to adopt peripheral solutions since they fall outside the already in-built instructions. The situations of L1 and L2 learning are very much similar, which highlights the fact that UG has a significant role in second language acquisition.

On the other hand, the minds and situations of L1 and L2 learners have a variety of properties. One of the most obvious differences is that L2 learners already acquire the grammar of the first language which follows the principles of UG, while it has a specific series of values its parameters (Ellis 1994). Because of this reason, L2 learning should take two possibilities into consideration. One is about the learner using direct access to UG, the other about indirect access through the first language. However, the research has shown that L2 learners still have access to the principles of UG since they can correctly judge grammatical errors without prior exposure to such sentences (Cook 1991).Parameter-fixing can be used to describe the relationship between L1 and L2 acquisition. For instance, if a L2 learner has direct access to UG, then English learners of Spanish should not have learning problems despite the fact that the pro-drop parameter of the two languages is fixed differently. Instead, the learner only requires the right trigger to adjust the parameters afresh (Chomsky 1982). However, some people have argued that a person is usually cut out from UG at a certain age. The role of universal grammar has been described by various hypotheses. The Full Access Hypothesis states that L1 syntactic structures in adults are transferred in the initial stage into L2 when they start second language learning, but they use the rules of the second language. The No Access Hypothesis argues that there is no access of universal grammar to adult learners; only cognitive mechanisms help in second language learning (Sauter, 2002). Similarly, Rossi et al. (2006) have found in their study that when people make mistakes in their first language before native speakers, their brain react to those who make mistakes; the children who learn a second language react the same, but this process is weakened in adult learners. It means UG is strong in childhood only, but reduced and vanished in maturity.

Connected to this, Weber-Fox and Neville (1996) investigated that if a second language is learned before the age of 11, then universal grammar works as it does in the acquisition of the



first language. The decline of universal grammar begins after the time appointed by critical period hypothesis. Universal grammar remains inactive when the time of critical period hypothesis is completed. Either its role is lessened or totally inactive. Babcock et al. (2017) conducted their study on the Italian people. This also suggests that universal grammar remains active in first language acquisition and limited to second language learning when it is learned after childhood. Hawkins (2011) relates the significance of universal grammar in both L1 and L2. He argues that there is no doubt about the access of universal grammar in first language acquisition, which enables first language acquisition more rapid and easiest; however, universal grammar does not have full access to second language learning, though, there are certain universal principles that still influence interlanguage development.

Similarly, Cook and Newson (1996) discovered that as compared to first language acquisition, the role of universal grammar is confined in second language acquisition; they suggest that the dependency of second language learners is mostly on explicit learning and cognitive strategies. Ullman (2016) introduced the Declarative Model and Procedural Model. His model suggests that L1 and L2 have different memory systems. For example, first language speakers dominantly depend on the procedural memory model, while adult learners in second language learning depend on the declarative memory model. This shows that L1 has different stages than L2 learning, and their syntactic information is processed differently from L2. This study aims to determine whether adult learners rely on the same innate capacity for language acquisition or if their learning methods change when acquiring a second language. The study investigates whether universal grammar is still used by adult learners or their brains utilize other neural pathways and methods for second language learning. This study explores how the first language acquisition process is different from second language learning and how neurolinguistics plays a role in distinguishing parts of the brain that are active in first language acquisition and second language learning.

Clashen and Muiyken (1986) indicated that UG could not influence L2 acquisition. They said that the knowledge of second language was acquired through some other senses of human brains, which was not through language sense—Universal Grammar. This theory denied the effects of UG to SLA fundamentally. The other researchers who agreed with this theory like Rod Ellis (1994: 454) presented two points of view: (a) there were extremely differences between adult's L2 acquisition and L1 acquisition; (b) the reasons of the differences were that L2 learners acquired language knowledge through learning strategies and instructions while L1 learners learned their native language by language sense UG. Therefore, UG has little effect to L2 acquisition. Although Cook and Newson (1996) admit that L2 learning is more complex than that of L1 since it happens at a later stage of cognitive development suggesting that the weaker relationship between language and cognition, they believe in innateness extending from Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar. However, if it is true that the role stays the same in L2 learning, why a majority of people is less efficient in their second language. Therefore, Universal Grammar, which is an innate biologically language faculty, seems to play not enough role, if at all, in second language acquisition suggesting that L2 is acquired with domain-general mechanism. Domain general learning capacities propose that different domains are utilized for an individual to acquire a language, in this case, L2. Second language learners intuitively depend on other various cues (e.g., social cues, acoustic cues, visual cues, and etc.) UG as a result, they



develop unique habits for the learning to progress. For example, many language learners write down the sound of pronunciation of a L2 word in their native language to remember better. The use of other mental faculties in second language acquisition suggests that it is different from first language acquisition.

2.1 Theoretical framework

2.1.1 Universal grammar theory

Universal Grammar Theory serves as the main theoretical foundation for this study. Noam Chomsky proposed it, arguing that every human has an inborn language faculty. This faculty holds universal principles that apply to all languages. Learners pick up languages by tweaking parameters based on the input they receive. The theory breaks down into two key parts. Principles are universal rules that all languages share. Parameters are variable settings that shift from one language to another. So some languages let you drop the subject, for instance, while others demand you always say it.

The Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis came from Bonnie Schwartz and Rex Sprouse. It claims that learners start by using what they know from their first language. But they still have access to Universal Grammar as they work through learning a second language. Michael Long suggested the Critical Period Hypothesis. Language learning ability drops off after a certain biological age, he argued. So that explains why kids usually end up more fluent than adults.

2.1.2 Interlanguage theory

Interlanguage Theory came from Larry Selinker. He argued that second language learners build their own temporary linguistic system along the way. This system shows the influence of their first language while also revealing their growing grasp of the second one. It's not a simple mix of errors and correct forms. Instead, it's a structured, evolving state that sits somewhere between the native tongue and the target language. Learners don't jump from one to the other overnight. They pass through this in-between stage, which has its own rules and patterns. That system is what Selinker called interlanguage, and it changes as the learner picks up more knowledge and experience. These frameworks show how people pick up grammar. They also help explain why learner errors follow patterns instead of being random. A key question is what role innate linguistic ability plays in second language acquisition. Age and first language interference both have an impact, too. And there's a link between cognitive development and how language is learned. Taken together, these theories give a solid understanding of second language learning from a generative linguistic angle.

2.2 Historical Development of Universal Grammar

The idea that humans are born with a natural ability for language really took off after Noam Chomsky challenged behaviorist views on language learning back in the 1950s. Behaviorists thought kids picked up language by copying others and getting rewarded for it. But Chomsky pointed out something interesting. Children constantly produce brand-new sentences they've never even heard before. That didn't fit the imitation model at all. A key idea behind Universal Grammar is the "Poverty of Stimulus" argument. It basically says the language kids here aren't rich enough to explain how they end up with such complex grammatical knowledge. So there must be some built-in mental system that helps them learn. Limited input leads to limited grammar, the argument goes. During the 1980s and 1990s, researchers started applying UG



theory to second language learning, too. They wanted to know if adults still have access to that innate system when they pick up another language.

3. Research Framework

This study is based on a qualitative research methodology through a thorough review of the literature. Data were collected from scholarly books, journal articles, and previous research studies related to Universal Grammar and second language acquisition. The selected literature was critically analyzed to identify key theories, arguments and empirical findings on the accessibility of UG in adult second language learning. This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design. In fact, the research is based on a literature review, in which previous studies related to Universal Grammar (UG) and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have been examined, and relevant theories have been analyzed. The study relies solely on the review and analysis of scholarly literature, and no primary data were collected."

4. Discussion

Adults still have full access to Universal Grammar when learning a second language, according to this approach. Studies on syntax back this up. Learners can grasp complex grammatical rules and constraints without much trouble. The Partial Access Hypothesis says adult learners can only tap into Universal Grammar partially. They rely a lot on their first language. And some grammatical features that don't exist in their native tongue become a real struggle. The No Access Hypothesis suggests adults lose direct access to Universal Grammar. They turn to general cognitive strategies and explicit teaching instead. This shift changes how language is learned, moving away from instinct and toward conscious effort. But does that mean adult learning is fundamentally different? It certainly raises questions about the limits of second-language acquisition later in life. Interlanguage is a linguistic system that learners build as they go. Errors aren't random they follow rules. This shows language acquisition is an active mental process, not just mindless copying.

Universal Grammar has changed how we think about language learning. But it's far from perfect, and several strong criticisms have emerged over the years. A major complaint is that UG puts too much weight on syntax. It mostly ignores the social and environmental factors that shape how we pick up language. Thinkers like Lev Vygotsky argued that social interaction is absolutely central to language development. Then there's the problem of proof. Some researchers say exposure, memory, and general cognitive strategies might be enough to explain language acquisition without needing any built-in grammar. Studies on the Critical Period Hypothesis add another layer of doubt. Adults often struggle more with pronunciation and grammar than kids do. This makes you wonder just how much access we have to UG later in life. Still, despite all these issues, Universal Grammar remains a hugely influential theory. It helps explain why language learning follows such systematic patterns and why learners make similar mistakes across totally different languages.

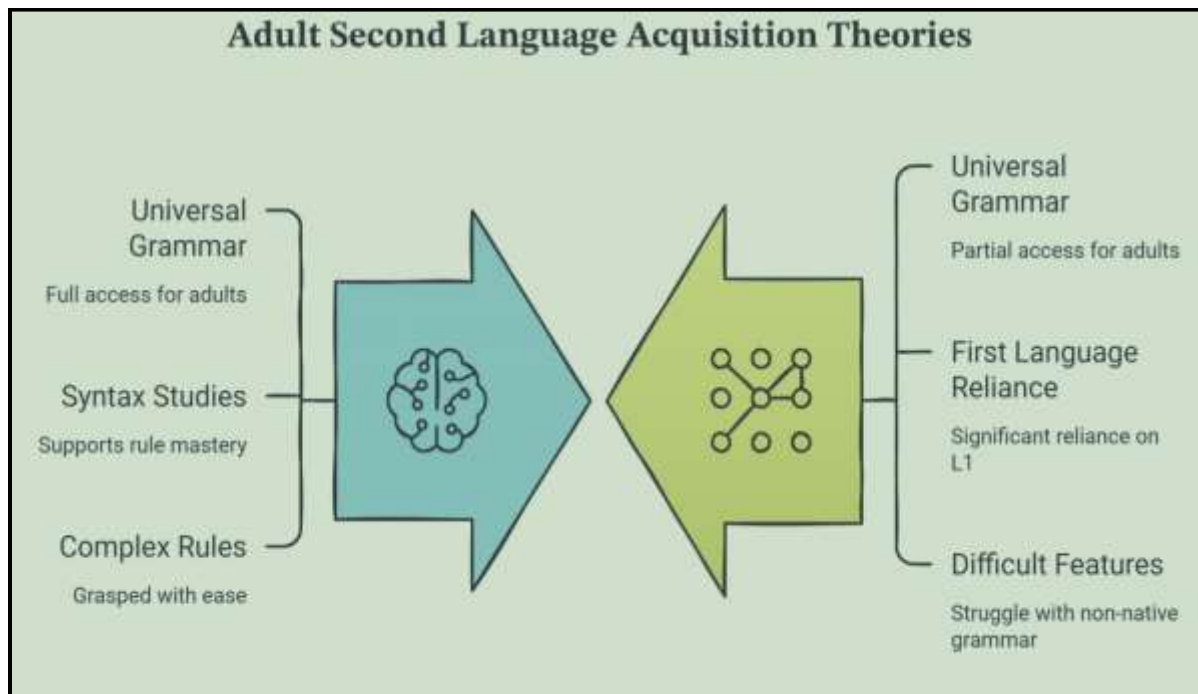


Figure 2. UG and SLA

The relationship between Universal Grammar (UG) and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) remains one of the most contested issues in contemporary linguistics. The literature reviewed in this study suggests that second language learning cannot be adequately explained through environmental exposure, imitation, or explicit instruction alone. Instead, the evidence indicates that adult learners develop systematic and rule-governed interlanguage grammars that exhibit characteristics consistent with Universal Grammar. The existence of interlanguage itself provides a compelling argument against purely behaviorist accounts of language learning because learners produce structured grammatical systems that are neither identical to their first language nor fully representative of the target language. Such developmental systems demonstrate that learners actively construct linguistic knowledge rather than merely reproducing linguistic input.

Table 2. Meta-Analytic Synthesis of Recent Research on Universal Grammar and SLA

Study	Focus	Methodology	Major Findings	Implications for UG
Slabakova (2019)	Feature Reassembly Hypothesis	Review of empirical SLA studies	Adult learners acquire new features gradually through restructuring	Supports partial accessibility of UG
Rothman, Long & Gonzalez Alonso (2019)	Bilingual acquisition and syntax	Comparative analysis	L1 transfer strongly influences early stages of SLA	Supports Full Transfer/Full Access
White (2020)	UG and adult SLA	Theoretical review	Learners demonstrate sensitivity to abstract	Evidence for continued UG



			syntactic constraints	influence
Dekydspotter & Sprouse (2021)	Syntax and processing	Experimental studies	Learners acquire complex structures beyond explicit input	Supports poverty-of-stimulus claims
Hawkins & Casillas (2022)	Interface phenomena	Generative analysis	Difficulties emerge at syntax-discourse interfaces rather than core syntax	Suggests partial access to UG
Ionin & Montrul (2023)	Heritage and L2 grammar	Cross-linguistic comparison	Universal constraints shape learner grammars despite variability	Supports constrained interlanguage
VanPatten et al. (2023)	Input processing and SLA	Experimental review	Input quality significantly affects acquisition outcomes	Supports interaction of UG and environment
Leung & Yuan (2024)	Parameter resetting	Longitudinal studies	Adult learners can reset parameters under sufficient exposure	Evidence for continued UG accessibility
Marsden & Whong (2024)	Generative SLA review	Meta-synthesis	Learner grammars remain systematically constrained	Supports UG-based explanations
Rothman et al. (2025)	Neurolinguistic evidence	Neurocognitive review	Adult learners recruit both language-specific and general cognitive systems	Supports integrated UG-cognition model

The findings reviewed in this paper provide substantial support for the argument that UG continues to influence second language acquisition, although the degree of accessibility remains disputed. The Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis proposed by Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) offers one of the most influential explanations of adult language learning because it acknowledges the dual influence of first-language knowledge and innate linguistic principles. Evidence from studies of syntactic constraints, parameter resetting, and structural dependency indicates that adult learners often acquire grammatical properties for which direct instruction or explicit input is insufficient. Such findings lend support to the poverty-of-the-stimulus argument and suggest that learners possess access to abstract linguistic principles that extend beyond the information available in the input. At the same time, the evidence does not uniformly support complete accessibility to Universal Grammar in adulthood. Research influenced by the Critical Period Hypothesis demonstrates that age significantly affects ultimate attainment in a second language. Long (1990) argued that maturational constraints reduce linguistic flexibility after childhood, while subsequent neurolinguistic investigations have revealed differences in the processing of first and second languages. Recent neurocognitive studies have further



strengthened this position by showing that adult learners rely more heavily on explicit memory systems and metalinguistic knowledge than native speakers, whose linguistic processing is largely automatic and procedural. These findings suggest that access to Universal Grammar may be mediated by cognitive maturation rather than remaining fully intact throughout the lifespan.

The debate between Full Access, Partial Access, and No Access positions therefore appears less dichotomous than earlier formulations suggested. Contemporary evidence increasingly supports an intermediate position in which universal grammatical principles continue to constrain second language development, but their accessibility is filtered through the learner's first language, cognitive resources, age, and learning environment. This interpretation aligns with Hawkins' argument that adult learners retain sensitivity to certain universal constraints while experiencing difficulties with parameter resetting and feature reassembly. Consequently, second language acquisition may involve both innate linguistic mechanisms and domain-general cognitive processes operating simultaneously.

Another significant issue emerging from the literature concerns the role of interlanguage development. Selinker's (1972) concept of interlanguage remains highly relevant because learner errors consistently exhibit systematicity rather than randomness. The persistence of developmental sequences across learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds suggests that second language acquisition follows predictable patterns. Recent generative studies have demonstrated that even when learners produce non-target-like forms, their interlanguage grammars generally remain constrained by principles of possible human language. Such findings provide indirect support for Universal Grammar by indicating that learner grammars rarely violate fundamental syntactic principles.

Nevertheless, recent scholarship has also challenged some foundational assumptions of UG. Usage-based theorists and cognitive linguists argue that frequency effects, statistical learning, and input distribution may account for many phenomena previously attributed to innate grammatical knowledge. Scholars working within emergentist frameworks maintain that language acquisition results from the interaction between general cognitive abilities and linguistic experience rather than from a dedicated language faculty. These perspectives have gained prominence in recent years because advances in corpus linguistics, psycholinguistics, and computational modeling have demonstrated the powerful role of input frequency and pattern recognition in language learning. Consequently, the debate has shifted from whether innate mechanisms exist to determining the extent to which they contribute relative to experience-based learning processes.

Recent developments within generative linguistics have also refined the notion of Universal Grammar itself. The Minimalist Program has progressively reduced the theoretical content attributed to UG, proposing that language may emerge from a limited set of computational operations interacting with broader cognitive systems. This shift reflects an attempt to reconcile biological explanations of language with evidence from neuroscience and evolutionary linguistics. As a result, contemporary discussions of UG in SLA increasingly focus on feature



valuation, interface phenomena, and processing constraints rather than on broad parameter-setting models that dominated earlier research. From a pedagogical perspective, the findings imply that second language instruction should not be viewed merely as the transmission of grammatical rules. Instead, instruction should facilitate the activation and restructuring of learners' internal linguistic systems. While explicit teaching remains important, especially for adult learners, successful acquisition appears to depend on opportunities for meaningful interaction, extensive input, and cognitive engagement with linguistic structures. The interaction between innate linguistic predispositions and environmental exposure therefore represents a more comprehensive explanation of second language learning than either factor alone.

Overall, the evidence reviewed in this study suggests that Universal Grammar continues to provide a valuable explanatory framework for understanding second language acquisition. However, contemporary research indicates that UG operates alongside cognitive, social, and environmental factors rather than functioning as an isolated mechanism. The most convincing interpretation emerging from recent scholarship is that adult learners retain some degree of access to universal linguistic principles, although such access is influenced by first-language transfer, maturational factors, processing limitations, and instructional context. Future research integrating generative linguistics, neurolinguistics, cognitive science, and corpus-based methodologies may offer a more comprehensive understanding of how innate and experiential factors interact during second language acquisition.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the relationship between Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Universal Grammar (UG). The findings from various studies and analyses suggest that second language learning is a systematic cognitive process rather than a skill acquired solely through imitation and practice. Language learners develop a temporary linguistic system based on the interaction between their first language and the target language, commonly referred to as interlanguage. The errors produced by learners are considered a natural part of the learning process and indicate their attempts to understand and apply linguistic rules. The study also highlights the Full Access Hypothesis, No Access Hypothesis, and Partial Access Hypothesis, which explain different perspectives on adult learners' access to Universal Grammar. Although linguists have not reached complete agreement on this issue, substantial research evidence suggests that adult learners continue to be influenced by UG principles while acquiring a second language. Furthermore, studies on parameter resetting, the Poverty of the Stimulus argument and syntactic structures support the view that innate linguistic knowledge plays an important role in language learning. Overall, Universal Grammar provides an important theoretical framework for understanding second language acquisition. However, factors such as age, educational environment, social context, and first-language influence also affect the language learning process. Therefore, further research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the extent to which adult learners can access and utilize Universal Grammar in second language acquisition. Universal grammar plays a significant role in the acquisition of second language. All humans are born with an innate ability to learn a language, which helps children acquire their first language. This ability is also responsible for second language acquisition.



References

- Bley-Vroman, R. (1989). What is the logical problem of foreign language learning? *Linguistic Analysis*, 20(1–2), 3–49.
- Chomsky, N. (1981). *Lectures on government and binding*. Foris Publications.
- Chomsky, N. (1982). *Some concepts and consequences of the theory of government and binding* (Vol. 6). MIT Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1995). *The minimalist program*. MIT Press.
- Clahsen, H., & Muysken, P. (1986). The availability of Universal Grammar to adult and child learners: The study of the acquisition of German word order. *Second Language Research*, 2(2), 93–113.
- Cook, V. J. (1991). The poverty-of-the-stimulus argument and multicompetence. *Interlanguage Studies Bulletin (Utrecht)*, 7(2), 103–117.
- Ellis, R. (1986). *Understanding second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
- Hawkins, R., & Casillas, J. V. (2022). Second language acquisition and linguistic theory: Current developments in generative approaches. *Annual Review of Linguistics*, 8, 177–196.
- Ionin, T., & Montrul, S. (2023). Features, interfaces, and variability in second language acquisition. *Second Language Research*, 39(2), 145–168.
- Jespersen, O. (1922). *Language: Its nature, development and origin*. George Allen & Unwin.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon Press.
- Lado, R. (1957). *Linguistics across cultures: Applied linguistics for language teachers*. University of Michigan Press.
- Leung, Y. K. I., & Yuan, B. (2024). Parameter resetting and feature reassembly in adult second language acquisition. *Languages*, 9(1), 25–41.
- Long, M. H. (1990). Maturation constraints on language development. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 12(3), 251–285.
- Marsden, H., & Whong, M. (2024). Generative second language acquisition: Current perspectives and future directions. *Language Teaching*, 57(1), 1–24.
- Parodi, T. (2013). Universal grammar and second language acquisition. In C. A. Chapelle (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Phinney, M. (1987). The pro-drop parameter in second language acquisition. In T. Roeper & E. Williams (Eds.), *Parameter setting* (pp. 221–238). D. Reidel Publishing.
- Rothman, J., Long, D., & Gonzalez Alonso, J. (2019). Third language acquisition and linguistic transfer. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 39, 145–163.
- Rothman, J., Slabakova, R., & Puig-Mayenco, E. (2025). Neurocognitive perspectives on linguistic representation in multilingualism. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 28(1), 1–18.
- Sauter, K. (2002). *Transfer and access to Universal Grammar in adult second language acquisition*.



- Schwartz, B. D., & Sprouse, R. A. (1996). L2 cognitive states and the full transfer/full access model. *Second Language Research*, 12(1), 40–72.
- Schwartz, B. D., & Sprouse, R. A. (1994). Word order and nominative case in nonnative language acquisition: A longitudinal study of (L1 Turkish) German interlanguage. *Second Language Research*, 10(4), 317–368.
- Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 10(1–4), 209–231.
- Siefert, T. R. (2013). *Translation in foreign language pedagogy: The rise and fall of the grammar translation method* (Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University).
- Slabakova, R. (2019). The scalpel model of third language acquisition. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 23(2), 644–658.
- Thomas, M. (1995). Acquisition of Japanese reflexives by English-speaking learners. In L. Eubank, L. Selinker, & M. Sharwood Smith (Eds.), *The current state of interlanguage* (pp. 95–123). John Benjamins.
- VanPatten, B., Keating, G. D., & Wulff, S. (2023). *Theories in second language acquisition: An introduction* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- White, L. (2003). *Second language acquisition and Universal Grammar*. Cambridge University Press.
- White, L. (2020). Universal Grammar and second language acquisition: The state of the debate. *Language Teaching*, 53(2), 223–236.