

(Re)thinking the Interface Hypothesis and its Implications for Language Teaching

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Introduction¹

The interface between syntax and other domains has recently become a key area of interest in Generative Second Language Acquisition (GenSLA). Much of the research on linguistic interfaces has been influenced by the Interface Hypothesis (IH), which was proposed by Sorace & Filiaci (2006) in an attempt to explain the non-target-like behaviour found at very advanced stages of second language (L2) acquisition. Originally, the IH claimed that narrow syntactic properties are acquirable, whereas properties at the interface between syntax and other domains may not be fully acquirable (cf. Sorace & Filiaci, 2006). In its most recent version, the IH specifies that properties at grammar-external interfaces (i.e. interfaces which connect the grammar to external domains) are more likely to be a source of problems in end-state grammars than properties involving grammar-internal interfaces (i.e. interfaces which link different modules within the grammar) (cf. Sorace & Serratrice, 2009; Tsimpli & Sorace, 2006; Sorace, 2011). The IH is, therefore, an account of non-target patterns at the level of ultimate attainment.

While some studies have supported the IH's predictions (e.g. Belletti & Leonini, 2004; Belletti, Bennati & Sorace, 2007; Bohnacker & Rosén, 2007; Lozano, 2006; Madeira, Xavier & Crispim, 2009; Sorace & Filiaci, 2006; Wilson, 2009; among others), others have produced results which disconfirm them (e.g. Domínguez & Arche, 2014; Donaldson, 2011, 2012; Ivanov, 2012; Slabakova, Rothman & Kempchinsky, 2011; Slabakova, Kempchinsky & Rothman, 2012; Slabakova, 2013; among others). Despite their relevance, some of the latter studies have been overlooked in the IH-related literature (e.g. Sorace, 2011; White, 2009, 2011a). To date, the research on or inspired by the IH has exclusively examined questions pertaining to linguistic theory. No attempts have been made to explore the pedagogical implications of the findings on L2 acquisition at the interfaces. Therefore, it remains unclear if and how these findings might be useful for L2 pedagogy.

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With a view to addressing these issues and contributing to advance the field of Applied GenSLA – a new strand within applied linguistics which explores the interface between GenSLA and L2 pedagogy (cf. Whong, Gil & Marsden, 2013) –, the present paper seeks to (i) discuss the IH in the light of recent findings on L2 acquisition at the interfaces, including those which have been overlooked in previous review articles, and (ii) propose potential pedagogical implications of GenSLA findings on linguistic interfaces. The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 summarises recent research findings on L2 acquisition at grammar-internal and grammar-external interfaces. In section 3, I examine the consequences of those findings for the IH. Section 4 explores how research findings on the IH can inform L2 teaching. Finally, in the last section, the main conclusions of the paper are presented.

Research on L2 acquisition at the interfaces: An overview

In recent years, the focus of research in GenSLA has been on structures at linguistic interfaces, i.e. structures that are subject to conditions of varying nature, requiring the integration of knowledge from syntax and other domains, such as grammar-internal modules, like semantics and morphology, or grammar-external domains, like discourse and pragmatics². Research findings have consistently shown that some interfaces tend to be problematic to L2 learners/speakers (L2ers), while others do not cause significant problems to them. Nevertheless, the status that each interface has in interlanguage grammars is still a matter of ongoing debate and research. In order to present a balanced review of the evidence for and against the IH, this section will briefly summarise the most significant findings of recent work on L2 acquisition at the interfaces, considering both internal and external interfaces.

Grammar-internal interfaces

For the IH as currently formulated, the dissociation between grammar-internal and grammar-external interfaces is vital to explain well-attested difficulties of L2ers such as optionality and fossilisation. According to this hypothesis, the interface structures that are especially prone to optionality and fossilisation in end-state grammars are those which involve external interfaces. Thus, internal interfaces are not expected to pose widespread problems at highly advanced levels of proficiency.

Confirming the latter prediction, the research carried out over the past decade has consistently shown that structures at internal interfaces are not a

² Underlying this line of inquiry is the assumption that the language faculty is composed of various modules which interact in specific ways (cf. Rothman & Slabakova, 2011, and White, 2009, for further details).

typical locus of fossilisation and optionality in end-state grammars. Only in exceptional cases do these structures create difficulties to L2ers at a near-native level (e.g. Hopp, 2007, 2009). Although internal interface structures do not cause significant problems at the level of ultimate attainment, they are not always easy to acquire. In fact, while some internal interfaces, like the syntax-semantics interface, do not typically pose significant developmental challenges to L2ers (e.g. Dekydtspotter, Sprouse & Anderson, 1997; Dekydtspotter, Sprouse & Swanson, 2001; Dekydtspotter, Sprouse & Thyre, 2001; Madeira, Xavier & Crispim, 2010; Slabakova, 2003, 2009; among many others)³, others, most notably the syntax-morphology interface, do create problems. For example, L2ers tend to have difficulties in realizing bound inflectional morphology (e.g. tense marking), as well as free function words (e.g. articles) in a target-like manner, even in non-elementary levels (cf. Lardiere, 1998, 2007; White, 2003, 2009; among many others). Due to these well-attested difficulties, Slabakova (2009: 280) proposes that functional morphology is “the bottleneck of L2 acquisition”.

Crucially, the results of GenSLA research on internal interfaces are fully compatible with the IH, because this hypothesis merely claims that properties at external interfaces are the primary locus of permanent optionality and fossilisation in end-state grammars, which does not necessarily mean that near-native speakers (near-NSs) will perform target-like with respect to all properties at internal interfaces or that no problems will occur at developmental stages regarding these interfaces.

Grammar-external interfaces

As the interfaces that are predicted to be vulnerable to optionality and fossilisation in end-state grammars are the so-called grammar-external interfaces, it is this type of interface that has been most investigated in the IH-related literature. Research on external interfaces has mainly analysed the interaction between syntax and discourse/pragmatics, a domain typically treated as being outside the grammar (White, 2009). The best researched property at this interface is the distribution of null and overt subjects in null subject languages (NSLs). Given that it was on the basis of evidence from studies on null and overt subjects that the IH was formulated, the focus of the present review of the literature on external interfaces will be on these structures. Research findings on the acquisition of other structures relevant to the syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface will also be discussed, though in less detail.

³ Note that there are a few attested cases of problems in the acquisition of properties at the syntax-semantics interface (cf. Bruhn de Garavito & Valenzuela, 2006; Guijarro-Fuentes & Marinis, 2007).

The availability of null subjects is a purely syntactic property that distinguishes NSLs, like European Portuguese (EP), Italian and Spanish, from non-null subject languages (NNSLs), like English. Even though the syntax of NSLs can generate both null and overt subjects, there is no true optionality between the two forms in these languages, as their distribution is determined by discourse/pragmatic conditions. More specifically, null subjects typically occur when there is topic maintenance, whereas overt subjects are produced when there is a change of topic. NSLs also display different preferences in the interpretation of null and overt pronominal subjects. According to the Position of Antecedent Hypothesis (Carminati, 2002), null subject pronouns are assigned to the antecedent in the canonical subject position (which tends to be interpreted as topic), while overt subject pronouns are generally assigned to antecedents in other positions, as the EP sentences in (1) illustrate⁴. Hence, it can be concluded that the production and interpretation of null and overt subjects involves the interaction between syntax and discourse/pragmatics.

- (1) a. A Maria_i disse à Joana_j que Ø_i vai ganhar o jogo.
(Lit. The Maria_i told to the Joana_j that Ø_i goes win the game)
b. A Maria_i disse à Joana_j que ela_j vai ganhar o jogo.
(Lit. The Maria_i told to the Joana_j that she_j goes win the game)

One of the first studies to investigate the L2 acquisition of the division of labour between null and overt subjects in NSLs was carried out by Sorace & Filiaci (2006). These researchers examined the interpretation of pronominal subjects in intrasentential contexts by a group of native speakers (NSs) of English who had attained a near-native level in Italian. Their results revealed that the near-NSs and the control group of NSs of Italian had similar patterns of preferences with respect to the interpretation of null subjects. In contrast, near-NSs behaved differently from NSs in the interpretation of overt subject pronouns. They had a higher preference for interpreting the subject of the matrix clause as an antecedent of overt subject pronouns, even when the context did not favour that interpretation. Significantly, Belletti, Bennati & Sorace's (2007) subsequent work on the production and interpretation of null and overt subjects in L2 Italian produced similar results.

These findings are regarded as evidence that near-NSs have acquired the syntax of null subjects and exhibit divergent behaviour only at the

⁴ In EP, these preferences can be cancelled by certain factors, such as the occurrence of the subjunctive mood.

interfaces. On the one hand, the near-NSs' target-like performance with respect to the production and interpretation of null subjects suggests that they have successfully reset the null subject parameter to the Italian value. On the other hand, the fact that near-NSs produce overt subjects in the absence of a shift of topic, and interpret overt subject pronouns as correferential with a pragmatically inappropriate subject antecedent indicates that it is at the interface between syntax and discourse/pragmatics that they manifest persistent difficulties. Therefore, these results lend support to the IH.

The asymmetry in the interpretation and production of null and overt pronominal subjects reported in these studies on L2 Italian-L1 English has also been found with other language combinations (e.g. Madeira, Xavier & Crispim, 2009; Tsimpli & Sorace, 2006, among others) and in other areas of language development, such as L1 attrition (e.g. Tsimpli, Sorace, Heycock & Filiaci, 2004) and L1 bilingual acquisition (e.g. Serratrice, Sorace & Paoli, 2004; Sorace, Serratrice, Filiaci & Baldo, 2009). The latter fact suggests that, as Sorace (2011) supports, the IH applies not only to the very advanced stages of L2 acquisition, but also to simultaneous bilingualism and L1 attrition.

To explain the difficulties which are found at external interfaces in these different areas of language development, at present, the proponents of the IH appeal to processing-based factors (cf. Sorace, 2011)⁵. Drawing on the concept of inhibitory control which has long been considered a crucial factor in bilingual performance in the field of Psycholinguistics (e.g. Green, 1986, 1998), the proponents of the IH claim that all speakers who have more than one grammar represented in the mind (i.e. L2ers, L1 attriters and simultaneous bilinguals) need to inhibit one language when using the other. According to them, the inhibition of the language not in use is a costly operation which may take attentional resources away from other linguistic tasks, leading to problems in processes that impose high demands on processing resources, like the ones which involve the integration of syntactic and grammar-external information (cf. Sorace, 2011). In other words, the proponents of the IH do not claim that speakers who have more than one grammar represented in the mind are unable to attain native-like representations for structures at grammar-external interfaces; rather, they propose that, even if these bilingual speakers' underlying linguistic representations are native-like, some level of residual, but permanent, divergence is expected in performance as a by-product of bilingual

⁵ For a summary of the previous accounts developed within the IH framework, see Sorace, 2011.

processing. Since the problems at external interfaces are explained as cognitive consequences of bilingualism, it is predicted that some level of divergence will arise with respect to these interfaces, independently of L1–L2 pairings.⁶

This prediction is not confirmed by all studies on the distribution of null and overt subjects. In a study on the interpretative preferences of elementary and advanced L2ers of EP concerning pronominal subjects, Madeira, Xavier & Crispim (2012), for example, show that Italian NSs exhibit native-like antecedent assignment preferences for null and overt subjects in EP, whereas Chinese L2ers of EP behave like the near-NSs of Italian investigated by Sorace and colleagues (i.e. they exhibit problems in the interpretation of overt pronominal subjects, but no difficulties regarding null subjects). These results suggest contra the IH that the integration of syntactic and discourse information does not necessarily cause difficulties to L2ers. In line with these findings, Rothman (2009) demonstrates that advanced L2ers of Spanish who are NSs of English generally display native-like knowledge of the distribution of pronominal subjects in the target language. In addition, a series of studies by Zhao (2011, 2012, 2014) on the interpretation of null and overt subjects in L2 Chinese, a language where the distribution of subjects is different from that found in Romance NSLs like Italian and EP (cf. Zhao, 2011, 2012, 2014 for details), shows that L2ers successfully acquire properties at the syntax-discourse interface, which is not consistent with the IH's predictions. Taken together, these findings on the distribution of null and overt subjects indicate that it may be a little premature to generalise about the impossibility of complete convergence at the syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface.⁷

Like the studies on the L2 acquisition of overt and null subjects, the research which focuses on other external interface phenomena has produced mixed results with regard to the validity of the IH. In fact, while some studies confirm the IH (e.g. Hopp, 2004, who examined scrambling in L2 German; Belletti & Leonini, 2004, Belletti, Bennati & Sorace, 2007, and Lozano, 2006, who investigated subject-verb inversion in NSLs;

⁶ Note that the occurrence of L1 influence effects in addition to processing effects is not ruled by this hypothesis.

⁷ Note that the latest formulations of the IH make claims that are best tested via online measures, but most of the studies which are not in line with this hypothesis use offline measures. These studies are, however, comparable to the ones by Sorace & Filiaci (2006) and Belletti, Bennati & Sorace (2007), because they also used offline measures. Hence, differences in results cannot be merely attributed to methodological differences.

Bohnacker & Rosén, 2007, who studied the prefield in L2 German; Wilson, 2009, who investigated personal and demonstrative pronouns in German (anaphoric dependencies), others disconfirm its predictions by demonstrating that L2ers display native-like knowledge of structures at the syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface, such as *c'est* clefts and *avoir* clefts in L2 French (Donaldson, 2012), left and right-dislocation in L2 French (Donaldson, 2011ab), clitic-doubling in L2 Bulgarian (Ivanov, 2009, 2012), focus fronting (FF) in L2 English (Slabakova, 2013), and FF, clitic left dislocation (CLLD) and clitic right dislocation in L2 Spanish (Domínguez & Arche, 2014; Slabakova, Rothman, Leal Mendez, Campos & Kempchinsky, 2011; Slabakova, Rothman & Kempchinsky, 2011; Slabakova, Kempchinsky & Rothman, 2012; Slabakova, 2013).

Crucially, the studies which demonstrate that target L2 ultimate attainment is possible at the syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface simultaneously show that knowledge of how discourse/pragmatics factors constrain syntax tends to emerge quite late in the course of L2 development and generally after the acquisition of purely syntactic properties (e.g. Ivanov, 2009, 2012; Rothman, 2009; Slabakova, Rothman, Leal Mendez, Campos & Kempchinsky, 2011; Slabakova, Kempchinsky & Rothman, 2012). It appears that discourse/pragmatic conditions can only be acquired with relative ease when they are the same in the L1 and the L2 (e.g. Lozano & Mendikoetxea, 2010; Madeira, Xavier & Crispim, 2012). Thus, the existing data on L2 acquisition at grammar-external interfaces generally supports the following prediction which the IH indirectly makes about L2 development: grammar-external interfaces present developmental challenges for L2 acquisition.

To sum up, it seems that linguistic interfaces behave in a less homogeneous way than assumed by the IH. From the results of the studies conducted to date, three conclusions can be drawn. First, grammar-internal interfaces are not generally a problem area at the level of ultimate attainment (even though they may be subject to developmental delays), which is in line with the IH's predictions. Second, properties at the syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface generally pose developmental problems to L2ers, as the IH indirectly predicts. Third, properties at the syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface are potentially, but not necessarily, problematic in ultimate attainment, which is not consistent with the IH, as currently formulated, in that it predicts that the integration of syntactic information with grammar-external information imposes an extra processing load that should ultimately lead to some level of divergence in performance at the end-state of L2 acquisition.

Implications for the IH

Given that the IH as currently formulated is not entirely supported by GenSLA research findings on linguistic interfaces, it needs to be reformulated to have greater descriptive and explanatory power. In a new formulation of the IH, two key questions must be (re-)examined: (i) Is the IH only concerned with ultimate attainment or does it also apply to developmental stages? (ii) Under what circumstances are structures at the syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface prone to permanent fossilisation?

The first question has generated some debate in the literature. On the one hand, the proponents of the IH claim that this hypothesis is an account of non-target patterns at the level of ultimate attainment, which is not intended to apply to developmental stages (Sorace, 2011), although they concede that it may indirectly make predictions about them (Sorace, 2012). On the other hand, some researchers, most notably Lardiere (2011) and White (2011b), argue that the IH does make predictions about L2ers at a non-near-native level that can and should be tested. Indeed, if external interface properties are residually difficult for the most proficient near-NSs, it is reasonable to expect L2ers at lower stages of acquisition to have similar or even more pronounced problems concerning those properties. As the studies carried out to date indicate that external interfaces do pose developmental challenges, in the future, the IH should be extended to developmental stages.

Unlike question (i), question (ii) has no straightforward answer. At present, it is still not well understood why some external interface structures fossilise while others do not. Nevertheless, recent work by Slabakova (2013) and Domínguez & Arche (2014) offers some clues as to why this happens. In her study on the acquisition of CLLD and FF in L1 English – L2 Spanish and of topicalization and FF in L1 Spanish – L2 English, Slabakova (2013) tentatively proposes that when the constructions at the syntax-discourse interface are the same in the L1 and the L2, as in the case of FF, they do not pose difficulties to highly advanced L2ers. If they are different in the two languages and transfer is misleading, then construction frequency in the input becomes a decisive factor in determining the success of the process of L2 acquisition: frequent constructions will be successfully acquired, but infrequent ones will not. Domínguez & Arche's (2014) work on the acquisition of CLLD and S(ubject) V(erb) – VS contrasts in L2 Spanish further indicates that it is not just the frequency of the target construction that matters, the lack of transparency in the evidence available in the input may also be a source of indeterminacy in non-native grammars. Thus, it appears that what may ultimately determine whether or not an

external interface structure will fossilise in end-state grammars is a combination of L1 and input factors. However, further research is needed.

In conclusion, the research that has been conducted over the past decade in the field of GenSLA clearly indicates that the IH needs to be reformulated, but its findings do not point the exact direction in which the hypothesis should go to become descriptively and explanatorily adequate. Researchers still have much work to do to develop a version of the IH offering an articulated and robust account of how different factors lead to (non-) convergent behaviour at external interfaces. In this respect, the investigation of the role of L1 and input factors and of how they interact with processing factors both at developmental and final stages of L2 acquisition may prove a fruitful line of inquiry for future IH-related research.

Implications for L2 teaching

Even though there are still some questions on L2 acquisition at the interfaces which remain unanswered in the literature, what is currently known about this process has significant implications for teaching practice that can and should be examined. Nevertheless, to date no attempt has been made to explore the relevance and potential applications of GenSLA findings on interfaces to L2 classrooms. As a result, interface structures tend to be overlooked by L2 teachers, material designers and specialists in L2 pedagogy. Yet, given that GenSLA research has consistently shown that at least some interface phenomena are problematic for L2ers, these phenomena should deserve attention in L2 classrooms. With a view to bridging the gap that currently exists between GenSLA and L2 pedagogy, in this section, I will show how research findings on the IH can inform L2 teaching.

At present, the only interface structures that tend to receive attention in L2 classrooms are those which involve the syntax-morphology interface. Nonetheless, this is not the only problematic interface for L2ers. In line with the IH, GenSLA research indicates that the syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface is also difficult to acquire and possibly more vulnerable to permanent fossilisation than the syntax-morphology interface. For this reason, and assuming that what is difficult to acquire requires attention in the classroom, this external interface should not be ignored in L2 teaching. In particular, when an external interface structure is not similar in the L2ers' L1 and L2, and the input on that structure is ambiguous and/or scarce, some form of explicit teaching may be beneficial. L2 teachers, hence, need to teach not only grammar contents relevant to the

syntax-morphology interface, but also constructions at the syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface.

Since the overall findings from Instructed SLA suggest that instruction can have a substantial impact on the rate of acquisition and ultimate attainment, but cannot alter the route of L2 acquisition (see Spada & Lightbown, 2012, for a brief review), the teaching of interface structures must take into account what is known about the development of these structures in interlanguage grammars. As previously noted, GenSLA research findings reveal that structures at the syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface are generally acquired late and, in certain cases, may not even be fully acquired. Furthermore, research findings suggest that, when the discourse/pragmatics factors which constrain syntax are not the same in the L1 and the L2, the syntactic properties of these structures are acquired before their discourse/pragmatic properties. In the light of these facts, it can be hypothesised that, in the cases where discourse/pragmatics conditions are not transferable from the L1, the teaching of structures at the syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface is more likely to be effective if teachers focus on their purely syntactic properties before teaching their discourse properties. As L2ers only seem to be ready to learn the latter properties at intermediate to advanced levels, it is advisable to focus on such properties only at those levels of proficiency. In the cases where discourse/pragmatics conditions are transferable from the L1, no explicit focus on these conditions seems to be needed throughout the process of L2 development. On the basis of the findings from GenSLA research and of what is currently known about instructed SLA, it is possible to propose the following general guidelines as to how structures at the syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface should be taught:

(i) *L2ers need to be exposed to linguistic input with multiple instances of the target interface structure, and where its syntactic and discourse/pragmatic properties are transparent and unambiguous.* This is because recent research suggests that, when the evidence to which L2ers are exposed is ample and unambiguous, they may overcome their developmental difficulties at the syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface (e.g. Slabakova, 2013; Domínguez & Arche, 2014).

(ii) *Teachers need to lead L2ers to notice external interface structures in the input and to raise their awareness of the syntactic and discourse/pragmatic rules that govern these structures.* Underlying this proposal is the assumption that noticing is a prerequisite for L2 acquisition (cf. Schmidt, 1990, 1993, 2001), and that L2ers who are aware of the rules underlying a linguistic structure are more likely to notice it when they

subsequently encounter it (cf. Ellis, 1994, 2003, among others). Thus, awareness can facilitate and trigger acquisition.

(iii) *Teachers can use the same types of tasks which are used in GenSLA experiments, in order to raise L2ers' awareness of structures at the syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface and/or provide them with opportunities for practice.* The tasks which may be used for teaching purposes include: a) *contextualized preference task*, which is a task that presents L2ers with a linguistic context and requires them to read alternative sentences and decide which of them is more appropriate in that specific context, as in (2); b) *picture verification task*, which is a task where L2ers are asked to decide which picture from a set of pictures with minor differences, like (3), is the most appropriate illustration of the sentence; and c) *translation task*, which is a task where L2ers have to translate sentences from their L1 into the L2, as in (4).

(2) **Contextualized preference task: Sample item on VS/SV orders in Spanish**

¿Quién llegó? (Lit. who arrived?)

a. Juan llegó. (Lit. Juan arrived)

b. Llegó Juan. (Lit. arrived Juan)

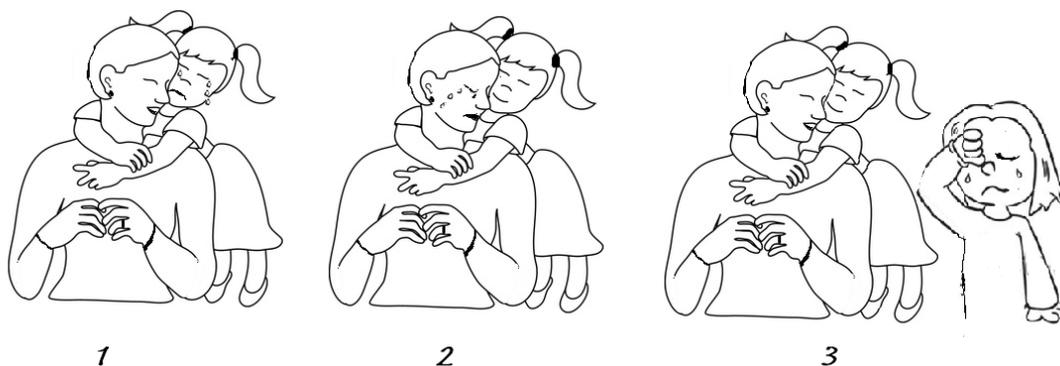
c. Both

*Answer: b*⁸

(3) **Picture verification task: Sample item on anaphora resolution in EP**

A filha abraça a mãe enquanto chora.

(Lit. The daughter hugs the mother while cries)⁹



⁸ In Spanish, when the subject is the narrow focus of the sentence (i.e. when it is the only constituent that introduces new information), VS orders are preferred over SV orders.

⁹ The three images were created on the basis of an image downloaded from <http://allcoloringpictures.com/download/Girl_Hugging_Her_Mom1.jpg> [retrieved on August 2015].

*Answer: I*¹⁰

(4) **Translation task: Sample item on CLLD in Spanish**

[Context: We need to buy a toy and sweets for Maria.]

The toy, I will buy before work.

*Answer: El juguete, lo compraré antes de ir al trabajo*¹¹

Even if all the guidelines just described are followed, teachers should not expect L2ers to acquire external interface structures straight away, and should also be aware that at least some of those structures may be particularly difficult to acquire.

To sum up, what is currently known about linguistic interfaces suggests that the syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface must receive more attention in L2 classrooms. GenSLA findings on the IH can inform the teaching of structures relevant to this interface in a number of ways: (i) in the selection and sequencing of grammar contents, (ii) in making teachers' expectations of L2ers more realistic and informed, and (iii) in the development of learning tasks. Although the existing data on L2 acquisition at the interfaces allow us to propose general guidelines for teachers, further research on the role of the quantity and quality of the input and on the roles of positive and negative evidence in L2 acquisition at external interfaces will be needed before we can satisfactorily answer the following question: How can one teach properties at external interfaces in an effective way?

Conclusion

In conclusion, over the past decade, the IH has become a very influential generalisation in the field of GenSLA. The research inspired by this hypothesis has produced mixed results, with some studies confirming its predictions and others disconfirming them. Taken together, research findings indicate that external interface structures are problematic for L2ers at developmental stages – at least when they are different in the L1 and L2 – and potentially, but not necessarily, at the level of ultimate attainment. To account for these facts, the IH must be extended to developmental stages

¹⁰ For details on why this is the right answer, see the discussion on null and overt subjects in section 2.

¹¹ Spanish CLLD and English topicalization are similar with respect to discourse function: in both structures, the left-dislocated phrase is the topic of the sentence. They are, however, different at a syntactic level in that the former construction, but not the latter, requires the left-dislocated phrase to be doubled by a clitic.

and its predictions about ultimate attainment must be reformulated. Instead of claiming that all external interfaces are prone to permanent fossilisation, the IH must clearly state under what circumstances fossilisation is likely to (not) occur. This requires further research.

Even though researchers still have much work ahead of them to piece together the puzzle of L2 acquisition at the interfaces, it is possible to propose implications of what is currently known about this process for L2 teaching practice. As shown in the present article, the findings from GenSLA research on the IH can be useful for L2 teachers in various ways, namely in shaping their expectations of L2ers, in the selection and sequencing of grammar contents and in the development of approaches to teaching interface structures. Thus, contrary to what is often assumed in and outside the field of GenSLA, the research conducted on the IH is relevant not only for L2 acquisition theory, but also for the theory and practice of L2 teaching. Future research on the IH should, therefore, explore two types of interfaces: (i) a linguistic interface – the syntax-discourse/pragmatics interface – and (ii) an interdisciplinary interface – the interface between GenSLA and L2 pedagogy.

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