

**Innatism and Second Language Acquisition:
Implications for English as a Second Language Instruction**

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Language as a System

Language is not one skill but a layered system, and each layer carries its own units and rules. Phonology governs the inventory of meaningful sounds and the combinations a language permits; an English speaker rejects the cluster in “ngoma” not from ignorance but because the phonotactics of English disallow initial /ŋ/. Morphology concerns the smallest meaning-bearing units, so that a learner who produces “unhappiness” has manipulated three morphemes. Syntax supplies the hierarchical rules by which words combine into phrases and clauses, semantics assigns meaning, and pragmatics governs use in context — the reason “Can you pass the salt?” functions as a request rather than a question about ability. A learner may control one subsystem while another lags, which is why an English learner with strong conversational fluency can still struggle with academic writing.

First-language development follows a strikingly uniform course. Infants move from cooing and babbling to holophrastic single words near twelve months, two-word combinations around eighteen months, telegraphic speech, and then a rapid expansion of morphology and complex syntax. The most revealing evidence appears in errors. Children who have said “went” correctly begin producing “goed” and “foots” — forms they have never heard from an adult.

Overregularization is not imitation breaking down; it is proof that the child has extracted a rule and is applying it productively.

Innatism and the Developmental Process

Innatism holds that this uniformity is possible because humans are biologically endowed for language. Chomsky (1959) argued in his review of Skinner that behaviorist accounts of imitation and reinforcement cannot explain productive novel utterances, and formalized the alternative through Universal Grammar (Chomsky, 1965): an innate architecture of principles common to all human languages, with parameters set by exposure to a particular one. The central argument is the poverty of the stimulus. The input a child receives is finite, degenerate, and provides almost no negative evidence about what is ungrammatical, yet every typically developing child converges on a complex grammar on roughly the same timetable regardless of culture or parenting style.

Read through this lens, development is triggering rather than teaching. Input does not build the grammar; it activates and specifies a system already present. Predictable stages and overregularization errors are precisely what the theory expects, because the child is running an internal acquisition mechanism, not accumulating habits.

First and Second Language Acquisition Compared

Innatist accounts predict genuine similarities. Both first and second language learners pass through developmental sequences that resist reordering by instruction; a learner will not produce third-person –s reliably because a teacher has taught it early. Both construct systematic interlanguage grammars and both produce rule-governed errors rather than random ones.

The decisive difference is outcome. First language acquisition is uniformly successful; second language acquisition is not, and it degrades with age. Johnson and Newport (1989) found

that grammaticality judgment performance among Chinese and Korean immigrants declined systematically with age of arrival, a finding widely read as evidence of maturational constraints. Innatists disagree sharply about why, and White (2003) frames the dispute as one about how much of Universal Grammar remains available after childhood. Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) argue for Full Transfer/Full Access: learners begin from the L1 grammar but retain access to Universal Grammar, so restructuring toward the target remains possible. Bley-Vroman (1990) counters with the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis, holding that adults have lost direct access and instead recruit general problem-solving abilities alongside knowledge of the first language. A second difference the theory does not itself explain is motivation and affect, which matter enormously in adult classrooms and sit largely outside the model.

Beyond the Mind: Contextual and Sociopolitical Factors

Innatism explains what the mind does with input, but it is silent on who receives that input, how much of it, and under what conditions. The theory treats input as a given. In real schools, input is distributed unequally by policy, ideology, economics, and fear, and these forces shape an English learner's education as much as any internal mechanism. Even the age effect is not purely biological. When Hakuta et al. (2003) analyzed U.S. census data from more than two million Spanish- and Chinese-speaking immigrants, English proficiency declined gradually with age of arrival rather than dropping sharply at a critical point, and years of formal education strongly predicted proficiency. Part of what looks like a maturational limit is a history of schooling, work, and opportunity.

Language policy and ideology are the first layer. When programs are built around an English-only orientation, home languages are treated as obstacles and English is taught at the expense of content. Umansky and Avelar (2023) argue that the outcomes of students classified as

long-term English learners expose four systemic pitfalls: an overwhelming focus on English that crowds out language diversity and core content, uniform supports that ignore individual needs, the stigma attached to the label itself, and a pattern of unequal opportunity to learn. Ideology also shapes how proficiency is heard. Flores and Rosa (2015) show that raciolinguistic ideologies can lead listeners to judge racialized students' language as deficient even when it matches what is praised in other speakers, so a learner's "proficiency" is partly located in the ear of the institution. Classification and accountability systems add a further distortion. Because students who succeed are reclassified and leave the English learner category, reporting only on current English learners makes the group appear permanently low-performing; Thompson et al. (2023) propose reporting on "ever English learners" to show the real trajectory of multilingual students and to inform fairer funding and policy decisions.

A recent example makes the stakes concrete. In January and February 2025, immigration raids in California's Central Valley coincided with a 22% increase in daily student absences across five school districts, with the largest increases among the youngest children: about 30% in prekindergarten and 27% in kindergarten through Grade 5 (Dee, 2025). This echoes earlier evidence that local immigration enforcement partnerships reduced Hispanic student enrollment by 10% within two years (Dee & Murphy, 2020). Read against innatist theory, the finding is striking. The early grades are exactly where the theory predicts input will be most productive, yet no Universal Grammar can process language a child never hears because fear keeps the family at home. For children who do attend, anxiety about family separation raises the affective barriers that, as this paper has noted, sit outside the model but inside every classroom. The implication for teachers is practical: attendance outreach through trusted adults, communication in families'

languages, and a clear message that school is a safe place are part of language teaching, not separate from it.

Economic and geographic context matters just as much, and I see it in my own classroom. At Ban Han Hee School in rural Surin, Thailand, my students speak an Isan dialect at home, learn Standard Thai at school, and meet English as a third language, almost only in class. Kaur et al. (2016) explain Thailand's persistently weak English results, despite national reform, largely through structural factors such as teacher preparation, exam-driven curricula, and resource gaps between urban and rural schools, rather than through any shortcoming in the learners themselves. An extensive reading program assumes books; a village with few English books and one shared phone per family does not supply the abundant input the theory requires. In this setting, the input must be deliberately built: a classroom library of graded readers, free audio practice that children can use at home, and home languages treated as a resource rather than a problem.

These factors do not refute innatism; they locate it. The theory describes what a learner's mind needs, while context decides whether the learner receives it. For my practice, this means ensuring that English learners have full access to grade-level content rather than English alone, valuing and using students' home languages, reading achievement data in ways that include former English learners, partnering with families when outside pressures threaten attendance, and building input-rich environments where the wider community cannot provide them.

Aligned Instructional Practice

An extensive reading program is the most direct instructional expression of the theory. Students self-select graded readers at a comfortable level and read widely with minimal comprehension accountability, on the rationale that acquisition requires abundant primary

linguistic data for the internal mechanism to work on. Nakanishi (2015) meta-analyzed 34 studies covering 3,942 participants and reported a mean effect of $d = 0.46$ for between-group contrasts and $d = 0.71$ for pre-post gains, concluding that extensive reading belongs in language curricula. Given the contextual factors above, the program only works if the school supplies the books and the time to read them.

A Total Physical Response sequence honoring a silent period is the second. Students respond physically to spoken commands of increasing complexity before any production is required (Asher, 1969). This aligns with the innatist claim that comprehension drives acquisition and that forcing early output does not accelerate the underlying system. For newcomer English learners it also lowers anxiety, since participation is demonstrated by action rather than speech, which matters most for children carrying stress from outside the classroom.

A Tension Worth Naming

Innatism sits uneasily with instruction. If grammar is triggered rather than taught, teaching grammar should matter little — yet Norris and Ortega (2000), synthesizing 49 studies, found that explicit instructional treatments substantially outperformed implicit ones. I take the defensible classroom position to be that rich comprehensible input remains the engine of acquisition, while explicit attention to form accelerates the noticing that feeds it. The theory tells me what to build a course around; it does not license me to ignore the evidence that focused instruction helps, or the social conditions that decide whether my students can use what I build.

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