
In this review, DeKeyser shares his findings from a myriad of studies around the difficult facets and features of learning grammar in a second language. Specifically, DeKeyser looks at grammatical features within a given L2 that create difficulty for learners, largely due to novelty or opaqueness of meaning. Based on his research he identifies three areas of difficulty for learners within this broader category (complexity of form, complexity of meaning, and complexity of the form-meaning relationship) and then expounds upon each.

Problems of meaning arise from language features in a target language that don’t exist in the L1. This can include articles, classifiers, grammatical gender, and verbal aspect. Two specific examples of this difficulty are L1 Chinese students learning the differences between the past perfect and the past perfect progressive verb tenses and L1 Japanese students learning when to use a, an, or the with nouns. These forms don’t exist in the learners’ L1. Unfortunately these differences between learners’ L1 and the target language (TL) make instructional treatment of these forms often ineffective.

Problems of form result from aspects of a TL’s grammar that are highly complex and require a number of correct allomorphs and morpheme choices to be made and also to be in the right syntactic place in a sentence. DeKeyser highlights that while the acquisition of basic word order has been evidenced by advancing learners, these learners have consistently continued to struggle with elemental morphology. Consider, for example, the use of the allomorph -s. When it comes to verb agreement, if the subject is a multi-word abstract noun phrase, many students will mistakenly forget to add a necessary -s.

Problems of form-meaning mapping occur when the link between form and meaning are not transparent. A clear example of this can again be seen in the allomorph -s. This same morpheme can be used in three different places, but with different meanings each time: -s added to the end of a verb to show agreement for
third-person singular (He plants); -s at the end of a noun to show plurality (many plants); and -s to show possessive nouns (The plant’s food).

In response to the question "where to look for direct evidence on what is difficult?", DeKeyser suggests utilizing fossilization studies, ultimate attainment studies, and research on order of acquisition for direct evidence on what is difficult. From these three study areas, he discusses the importance of saliency in grammatical forms, and that acquisition challenges exist in greater preponderance where there is little to no saliency of target forms, through existing research to draw on for these conclusions is limited.

He ends with some implications for instruction based on his research and insights into the grammatical challenges that learners face. For challenges of meaning, fill-in-the-blank or other choice-activities should be utilized. For challenges of form, activities that promote frequent practice and repetition should be utilized. And for form-meaning mapping, DeKeyser recommends association activities (e.g. through phrase combination tasks). These pedagogical implications are his conjectures-hypotheses for future research that have yet to be tested, but are grounded in the findings from his thorough analysis of existing literature on the subject.

This study interests me as it addresses one of my earliest questions in teaching EFL: What’s the best way to teach grammar, and what are the inherent challenges my students face in applying grammatical rules they’ve learned. In tutoring, I had one Japanese learner who I discovered after thorough analysis, was mistakenly omitting necessary articles belonging to nouns in instances where two or three adjectives came between the noun and where the article should have appeared. Fortunately, research has shown that noticing and attention to form/focus on form can mitigate these challenges and aid students in the acquisition of these grammatical forms. From my experience in the classroom, any students can whip through a page of isolated exercises and choose all the correct verb tenses, but when it comes to applying that knowledge in a multi-paragraph paper through editing their own work, many are helpless to find any mistakes at all. Continuing to notice and practice these forms through repetition in real contexts like their own composition is a challenge but has potential for fruitfulness and development.