Chomskyan linguistics and the interactive classroom[*1]

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0. Introduction

The approach to language advocated by Noam Chomsky has revolutionized the field of linguistics for the past five decades. Chomsky's revival of the Innateness Hypothesis has also had a major impact in other areas of the humanities and social sciences. Simultaneously, modern linguistics has been introduced as a subject of study at universities, and even in some American high schools in recent years. At universities, linguistics is increasingly taught as a component of general education, on a par with fields such as philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. As a consequence, the *teaching* of linguistics is now acknowledged as an independent discipline, as evidenced by the recent creation of a separate editorial section for linguistics-teaching scholarship in *Language*, the flagship journal of the *Linguistic Society of America*.[2]

Anecdotal evidence reveals that instructors of linguistics may have difficulties while teaching some core linguistic concepts, such as competence and performance, nature and nurture, or descriptivism and prescriptivism. The difficulties are partially due to a number of widespread beliefs, key among which being that children acquire a language because their parents teach them or that a standard language is the only 'correct' one. In this paper, I propose teaching strategies for several fundamental linguistic concepts – the Innateness Hypothesis, descriptivism, and linguistic competence. Based on extensive experience teaching linguistics and foreign languages, I propose strategies in light of a communicative student-centered approach to teaching and learning. The proposed strategies and sample of classes include a number of interactive activities

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[1] The term 'Chomskyan linguistics' refers to the linguistic theory developed by Noam Chomsky. This theory has appeared in various versions since the 1950s although the essence of it, relevant for the current purposes, has remained the same. Another term Chomsky uses for his own theory is 'generative grammar,' but since this term has been entertained by some other contemporary linguistic theories, I will keep the term 'Chomskyan linguistics' in order to differentiate it from other linguistic orientations, such as Lexical-Functional Grammar, for instance. See ten Hacken (2007) for the distinction between Chomskyan linguistics and other modern linguistic theories.

[2] The section on teaching linguistics became part of *Language* in August 2012.

and the usage of media. These strategies are primarily aimed at students who have not been exposed to linguistics during their previous education.[3] Additionally, I provide results from a survey on how students view the Innateness Hypothesis after being exposed to the aforementioned strategies.

What serves as an illustration of teaching linguistics in this paper is the course *Language and Mind* (LING 1010), an introductory course in linguistics, offered by the Department of Linguistics at the University of Connecticut. This course consists of two (fifty-minute) lectures followed by one (also fifty-minute) discussion class per week and is taken by seven hundred undergraduate students of various majors every semester. The class size of the lecture is 350 students, whereas the size of the discussion class is considerably smaller - typically about 30 students per discussion.[4]

The paper is organized as follows: In Section 1, I present some of the most common misconceptions on language that I as a linguistics instructor have encountered. In Section 2, I propose teaching strategies for minimizing such popular stereotypes. This section concomitantly contains references to the Appendix, which includes a number of interactive activities. Section 3 presents results from a survey on how students view the Innateness Hypothesis. Finally, Section 4 brings the concluding remarks and points to some future directions.

1.   Most common misconceptions

"Children learn a language because their parents teach them" – this represents one of the most popular myths on language learning. Ask any random person in the street or elsewhere how children learn their mother tongue and, in most cases, the answer is that they learn language because their parents teach them.[5] This widespread belief contrasts sharply with one of the core

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[3] It is worth emphasizing that the strategies presented here are primarily based on my own teaching experience for which I have not received formal training from the field of education. It is also worth of adding that the strategies developed here are markedly influenced by the view of language and linguistics held by the University Of Connecticut Department of Linguistics.

[4] This course may be used as one of two courses in 'Content Area 1: Arts and Humanities' that students in every Bachelor's Degree program at the University are required to complete. Additionally, the course may also be used to satisfy the general education requirement in 'Area D: Philosophical/Ethical Analysis' that applies to all undergraduate students in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

[5] This is actually well documented in the *Human language series* by Gene Searchinger (Searchinger 1995), in which a dozen people interviewed in the street provide exactly the same answer - that children learn language thanks to their parents.

ideas of Chomskyan linguistics – the Innateness Hypothesis.[6] According to this hypothesis, humans are equipped with a highly structured language learning mechanism that must be part of their genetic endowment. Chomsky's basis for this claim consists of two striking facts: (i) that the structure of all human languages is so enormously complex that no one has ever succeeded in writing a *complete* grammar of any human language (i.e., in providing a complete set of rules that can specify exactly which strings are grammatical); and (ii) that all biologically normal children readily acquire the grammar of their first language in a span of about four to five years, with no formal instruction.[7]   Despite this overwhelming evidence to the contrary, most people still believe that children simply 'learn' language from their parents or caregivers, through imitation or a similar mechanism, in the way that they might learn a person's name.[8] This is equally true in the first linguistics class, regardless of the classroom size.[9] Thus, one of the topmost tasks of a linguistics instructor is to challenge the common view that children simply 'learn' language in this way.

Another popular misconception is that "my/your/his grammar is very bad." This common misbelief has been held due to a standard-language ideology. According to this ideology, some (biologically normal) native speakers have bad grammar, and do not use their language correctly. The basis for such a stereotype lies in the existence of a so-called prescriptive grammar, a set of rules that advise native speakers on the 'correct' usage of their native language. Typically reflecting social status, prescriptive rules regulate the use of 'who' and 'whom,' 'ain't' and similar issues, ever present in formal school education. Such a notion of rules is in contrast with descriptive rules that provide information on how native speakers actually speak, and which is what modern linguists, including the ones working in the framework of Noam Chomsky, are interested in.[10]

Among other myths about language are the following: "Linguists have to speak many languages," "Some of the world's languages are more difficult than others," "The more

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[6] The contrast between innate qualities and experience-based knowledge has been a long-standing dispute known under various names – Plato's problem, the nature-nurture debate, or the logical problem of language acquisition.

[7] In his various works, Chomsky puts emphasis on the tension created by the aforementioned facts by claiming that reconciling them is the "fundamental empirical problem of linguistics" (Chomsky 1973: 232).

[8] This would be a common sense view, which often turns to be false on close scrutiny. To illustrate, to the naked eye, it appears that the earth is flat and that the sun goes around the earth.

[9] I have encountered this opinion in classes whose size ranged from seven to seven hundred students.

[10] This attitude about the usage of language has existed for a long time. It was promoted by Jonathan Swift and other literary figures in the 18th century, and has been present ever since. For discussion, see Curzan (2002), among many others.

intelligent someone is, the more sophisticated their language is," among many others (see APPENDIX A).

2. Teaching strategies for an introductory linguistics course

2.1. Minimizing stereotypes in light of a student-centered approach

In this section, I discuss teaching strategies I have pursued for the introductory linguistics course *Language and Mind* (LING 1010) in order to minimize the common stereotypes above.[11] Linguistics instructors should acknowledge that students bring to the classroom a number of beliefs on various topics, including language.[12] Students have developed their own understanding of the nature of language prior to college-level education. For a number of years in elementary and high schools, as well as in their families and circles of friends, students have been given instruction on what is 'right' and 'wrong' in their native language. As pointed out by Curzan (2002), the goals of linguistics courses in promoting language equality, discussing language change, and examining the socio-cultural aspects of language authority are thus in marked contrast to students' prior understanding of language. Therefore, it is of vital importance to approach students' beliefs in an adequate manner that would reconcile their potentially conflicting views with the objectives of the linguistics course.

The strategies I have developed for my linguistics classes are heavily influenced by the years I spent teaching in second/foreign-language (L2) classrooms, before deciding to embark on theoretical linguistics. That being said, strategies rarely involve lecture-type classes in which students are not deeply engaged. As in the L2 classroom, where a communicative approach is a must, my role as a teacher is just to 'lead' the class rather than to 'teach' it. Therefore, every activity starts from the student's opinion, whatever that opinion may be. Then gradually, students are supposed to learn about a particular concept by realizing themselves what occurs, with the help of the instructor who is just the leader of the class under this approach. Additionally,

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[11] For teaching a more advanced linguistics class, such as graduate-level syntax, for instance, see Lasnik (2013).

[12] Simultaneously, at the beginning of the course, most students are still not certain what linguistics entails as a field of study, or for that matter, why they are being asked to take the course. On the first day of class, I conduct an informal poll asking students to indicate their reasons for enrolling. Usually more than half the students reply that it fulfills a general education requirement. A similar situation was reported in Curzan (2013) among undergraduate students majoring in English K-12 education, who had an introductory linguistics course as a requirement. I believe the perception of linguistics as only marginally relevant, along with students' unawareness of the field altogether is partially due to the fact that linguistics is a relatively new field and as such has not been sufficiently promoted.

whenever possible, examples from real-life situations are included in the discussion, which, in my opinion, help students grasp linguistic concepts more easily.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that the strategies put forth in this paper are in accord with some basic pedagogical principles that hold across disciplines, labeled as scholarship on reflective thinking (e.g., King 2000). This approach favors a number of pedagogical issues, such as considering students' assumptions by providing them with the opportunity to discuss a new topic from their own angle, discuss controversial issues without definite answers, connecting various topics in class with real-world situations, and other similar principles that give students the chance to discuss a phenomenon from various perspectives.

2.2. *Strategies for starting a linguistics class*

In my experience, in the very first linguistics class, it appears efficient to ascertain the extent to which the student holds common misbeliefs. For this task, I propose a ten-minute activity adapted from Snyder (2002). Students are divided into groups of five or six and then given a list of some of the most common misconceptions on language (APPENDIX A). Their task is then to choose among 'true,' 'false,' or 'somewhat true.' It should be emphasized that, for the purpose of this activity, there is no true or false answer. However, students cannot just pick one option without providing supporting arguments.[13] To illustrate, if the student works on the statement 'Some of the world's languages are grammatically more complex than others,' they should explain why or why not this is the case by using specific examples.[14] Finally, this activity can be more entertaining if it is converted into a contest, where the winner is the group with the greatest number of supporting arguments for a particular statement. This type of 'positive competitiveness' can be highly motivating, and can greatly increase participation in an activity, with almost every student trying to contribute to their group's success.

2.3. *Strategies for introducing the Innateness Hypothesis*

The first approximation to the Innateness Hypothesis should be done in a systematic way, due to the deep-seated belief that children learn a language from their parents or caregivers. In

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[13] This method seems particularly relevant in classes that include (an increasing number of) international students, whose home countries may not favor a student-centered approach or generally an approach in which students express their opinion.

[14] Needless to say, in this way students not only discuss language issues but also practice developing their analytical skills.

order to do this, I first propose a ten-minute activity in which students become fully aware of two different types of knowledge that humans possess. Given a list of specific examples (APPENDIX B), students determine what constitutes nature and what belongs to nurture.[15] During this activity, again, students cannot just classify the items listed without explaining what led them to choose one or the other. *Speaking* is left as the last skill, in order to provoke a more lively discussion but also to make a transition to the subsequent activity, which involves language exclusively.

Once students become more aware of the two types of knowledge, the instructor can direct their attention to language issues. Since the most popular version of the 'parental instruction' viewpoint involves imitation, I propose an activity which focuses on this aspect (APPENDIX C). Students are supposed to reach a conclusion on whether the sentences listed are the product of imitation.[16] If some of students still believe that the imitation theory is tenable, the instructor should insist that they account for the elements that are missing in the children's utterances.

Another initial approach to the Innateness Hypothesis can involve the use of media. As is well known, there exists many languages around the globe that clearly arose fairly recently, through a process of creolization. Such languages provide striking support for the Innateness Hypothesis, because they develop rapidly and spontaneously in communities where the children's input takes the form of a so-called 'pidgin,' a relatively primitive system of communication created by adults with no shared language. One example is Nicaraguan Sign Language, which arose rapidly and spontaneously in Nicaragua in the 1970s and 1980s, when children and young adults were brought together at the country's first school for the deaf. The emergence of the language is illustrated in a short video from YouTube (APPENDIX D). For this activity I use the following strategy, which encourages a student-centered approach.[17] First, students are given a list of questions they should read before the video. This way they focus on certain aspects of the movie, relevant for the classroom activity at stake. Then, after the movie, the discussion follows.

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[15] If some examples appear to be challenging during this classification, then the instructor can give a hint that, unlike nature, nurture typically involves explicit instruction, such as playing a guitar, for instance.

[16] Admittedly though, at this initial stage of the course, even after this activity, some students will still believe that language is learned through imitation. Thus, the purpose of this activity is rather to make students question more thoroughly whether language learning is entirely based on imitation.

[17] I thank Jonathan Bobaljik and Susi Wurmbrand for sharing this strategy with me.

2.4.   Strategies for emphasizing the relevance of descriptive rules

As mentioned above, students have knowledge of what is 'right' and 'wrong' in their language, due to the existence of prescriptive rules promoted by the standard-language ideology. Thus, a high priority in any introductory linguistics course should be to inform students that linguists are mainly interested in descriptive rules, which capture the reality of how a language is actually spoken.[18]

For introducing the relevance of descriptive rules, I first propose the strategy of connecting prescriptive rules with real-life situations. This can be done through the following fifteen-minute activity (APPENDIX E). First, students are given a list of prescriptive rules. Then they are asked to pick the rules they were told to follow in school, and find some real-life situations in which these rules are used. This exercise can again be converted into a contest, where the winner is the student who finds the greatest number of real-life situations.

After reminding the students that prescriptive rules, although violated, are nevertheless part of daily life, the strategy that follows should focus on the relevance of descriptive rules. In doing so, I will share the strategy generally employed by linguistics instructors at the University of Connecticut. This is illustrated by an activity in which students are gradually guided to a point where they should realize that even most informal, casual speech follows highly sophisticated rules (APPENDIX F).

3.   Students' view on the Innateness Hypothesis

In this section, I present results from a survey on how students view the Innateness Hypothesis after being exposed to the aforementioned strategies. The data were collected in a discussion class at the end of Spring 2010. Thirty undergraduate students participated in this survey. The students' task was to write a paragraph in which they should discuss their current view on the Innateness Hypothesis by elaborating on the question as to whether language is fully learned or it is likely that humans have innate knowledge of language. The students were also allowed to provide an answer with a mixed argument, by claiming that the knowledge of language comes from both nature and nurture. The number of arguments favoring the Innateness

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[18] This of course does not mean that linguists are not interested in prescriptive rules. The role of prescriptive rules should be explicated to students.

Hypothesis demonstrates that the students believe that the language-learning mechanism belongs to the category of nature. Most students expressed the opinion that the capacity for language learning along with the mechanisms driving first language acquisition is innate. Thus, the students believe that humans are predetermined to learn language in a certain way. For such an opinion clearly favoring the Innateness Hypothesis, the students presented a number of arguments, key among which being that children learn any language very quickly, that pets, unlike humans, cannot acquire human language (despite being exposed to it), that all languages have certain traits and very similar grammatical patterns, even those that are not in contact (e.g., all languages have the vowel 'a'). Alongside innate language capacities, most students claimed that experience is also required. For such a claim they provided arguments such as that people speak different languages, depending on the language they have been exposed to, hence experience. Also, some students provided an argument that feral children never developed their language properly because they lived in isolation, being deprived of language experience. Crucially, the number of students who believe that language is fully learned is minimal in comparison to those who believe that the language-learning mechanism mainly belongs to the category of nature. Specifically, only three (out of 30) students claimed that language is fully learned at the end of the course. Their arguments is based on the fact that feral children never fully developed language properly because they were isolated until puberty (i.e., during critical period for language acquisition). The existence of a few students holding onto this view is not surprising, given that the nature-nurture debate continues to rage on.

4.   Conclusions

I have proposed strategies for teaching introductory linguistics courses to students without prior formal instruction in linguistics. The core of the strategies lies in reconciling the student's prior views with the objectives of the class. Students are supposed to build their own opinion on the Innateness Hypothesis and on the relevance of descriptivism through a series of interactive activities. Whenever possible, positive competitiveness is introduced, in order to increase students' participation and motivation. Overall, I have argued that deep-seated language stereotypes can be 'fixed' using the strategies proposed above.

APPENDIX A: INFORMAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Work in groups. Choose between 'Agree,' 'Disagree,' or 'Somewhat Agree.' Support your arguments by providing specific examples.

1. Some of the world's languages are grammatically more complex than others.

   Agree   Disagree   Somewhat Agree

   Examples:
   _____

2. Some speakers of English do not speak in a grammatically correct way.

   Agree   Disagree   Somewhat Agree

   Examples:
   _____

3. A linguist has to speak many languages.

   Agree   Disagree   Somewhat Agree

   Examples:
   _____

4. Parents and other caregivers teach young children their language.

   Agree   Disagree   Somewhat Agree

   Examples:
   _____

5. Some languages take longer than others for children to learn.

   Agree   Disagree   Somewhat Agree

   Examples:
   _____

6. Linguistic abilities increase as a child grows older.

          Agree   Disagree   Somewhat Agree

    Examples:

_____

7. Formal, careful speech is grammatically more sophisticated than casual, everyday speech.[19]

          Agree   Disagree   Somewhat Agree

    Examples:

_____

8. Cultures with greater technological sophistication tend to have grammatically richer languages.

          Agree   Disagree   Somewhat Agree

    Examples:

_____

9. The more intelligent someone is, the more sophisticated their language is

          Agree   Disagree   Somewhat Agree

    Examples:

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[19]'Sophistication' in this context refers to the grammar (the structure and rules) of a language, not to the content. Needless to say, the content related to philosophical issues in Aristotle's biology is more sophisticated than, let's say, talking about moving off-campus.

APPENDIX B: NATURE AND NURTURE

Work in groups. Complete the following table with the examples of conscious and tacit knowledge from the list below. Explain each example.

CONSCIOUS KNOWLEDGE (=NURTURE)	TACIT KNOWLEDGE (=NATURE)

Examples:
- playing chess
- driving a car
- chewing
- breathing
- reading
- playing a guitar
- swallowing
- knowing how to behave at a funeral
- crawling
- brushing one's teeth
- writing
- fearing
- speaking

Any more examples? _____

APPENDIX C: IMITATION

Consider the following children's sentences. First, determine what elements are missing and write them down in the space provided. Then, decide whether such sentences are uttered by adults. Finally, conclude if children produce such sentences by imitating their parents.

1. Want bickies.   _____
2. I loves you.   _____
3. What doing?   _____
4. Me sit there.   _____
5. Wash baby.   _____
6. Dolly gone?   _____
7. Mummy push baby.   _____

APPENDIX D: THE BIRTH OF A NEW LANGUAGE

YouTube Clip: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjtioIFuNf8 (7 min)

Answer the following questions regarding the emergence of Nicaraguan Sign Language:
- What type of signs did deaf people use while they were isolated from each other (i.e., before the school for the deaf was founded)? Which signs did they use at home?
- When the school for the deaf was opened, could the children learn an existing sign language? Did the educators succeed in forcing the children to learn such a language?
- How did the Nicaraguan Sign Language emerge? What kind of input did the children have?
- Why is the emergence of the Nicaraguan Sign Language one of the most powerful arguments in favor of the Innateness Hypothesis?

APPENDIX E: DESCRIPTIVE AND PRESCRIPTIVE RULES

Consider the following prescriptive rules in the left column. First, choose the rules you were told to follow in school. Then, create a real-life example where the rule is followed in the right column.

PRESCRIPTIVE RULES	SITUATIONS
Examples: • You are not supposed to say 'wanna' (e.g., *I wanna go* vs. *I want to go*) • You should not use double negatives (e.g*., I don't like nothing* vs. *I don't like*	*Examples*:

anything OR *I like nothing*)
- Do not split infinitives (e.g., *She needs <u>to carefully assemble</u> that model* vs. She needs *carefully <u>to assemble</u>* that model)
- Prepositions should not end sentences (e.g., *Who did you go to the concert <u>with</u>? vs. <u>With</u> whom did you go to the concert?*)
- Use 'I' instead of 'me' (e.g., *He is taller than <u>me</u> vs. He is taller than <u>I</u>*)

APPENDIX F: 'WANNA' CONTRACTION

In casual speech we can sometimes contract *want to* to *wanna:*
1) I **want to** help John.
2) I **wanna** help John.

We can also do this in questions:
3) Who do you **want to** help?
4) Who do you **wanna** help?

However, it is not always possible to do it:
5) I **want** Bill **to** help John.
6) *I **wanna** Bill help John.

Can you think of why this would be the case? In other words, how are 5) and 6) different from the other examples mentioned above?

What about if we look at the following examples:
7) Who do you **want to** help John?
8) *Who do you **wanna** help John?

How do these help us in determining the rules of 'wanna' contraction?

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