Innatism

(a.k.a. mentalism)

The Nativist Position

The best known and most influential proponent of the innatist position is Noam Chomsky. In his famous review of Skinner's book *Verbal Behavior*, he pointed out that imitation and SR-theories (SR= stimulus-response) of learning fail to explain how people come to produce sentences which they never heard before. He argues that cognition plays the decisive part in creating the ability to produce an unlimited number of sentences with the knowledge of a limited number of grammatical rules. He calls this ability *language competence* and distinguishes it from *performance*, which is the actual use of language which under the heat of communicative exchanges or when people are tired may lead to the production of grammatically faulty sentences.

* Chomsky's theory came shortly after Skinner's theory of Behaviorism. He argued that if children learn language by imitation, why do they say things have never heard before?

The innatist theory states that learning is natural for human beings. They believe that babies enter the world with a biological propensity, an inborn device, to learn language (Cooter & Reutzel, 2004). This human built in device for learning language has been coined the – LAD - *language acquisition device*. The innatist theory does somewhat explain how children can generate or invent language they have never heard. Researcher, N. Chomsky backed this theory stating that children use the LAD to generate and invent complex speech.

Explaining language learning on a cognitive basis raises the question, however, how children come to know the categories and rules of grammar which they need for a creative production of sentences. In that context the 'logical problem of language acquisition' and the 'poverty of the input argument' prompt researchers like Chomsky, Fodor, and Steven Pinker to argue that languages are not learned like any other complex faculty (flying airplanes or doing complex mathematical calculations, for instance) but 'acquired' on the basis of an innate knowledge of grammatical principles contained in the language acquisition device (LAD). In later versions of Chomskyan theories the LAD is renamed *Universal Grammar (UG)**. The 'logical problem of language acquisition', which gave rise to the problematic distinction of 'language acquisition' and learning, is seen to lie in the fact that adult language generally is full of grammatically errors, unfinished sentences and similar 'handicaps' which seem to make it impossible for the human brain/mind as a 'logical machine' to extract from that sort of controversial input the right sort of grammatical rules. Observation of children and their parents reveals, too, that adults do not give children explicit instruction in rules of grammar (which would undo the logical problem of language acquisition).

** Chomsky hypothesizes that infants must be born with some special built-in ability to learn language. He called this biological ability as the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). This device contains the main rules for all possible
human languages. Chomsky called this set of common rules Universal Grammar (UG). Infants universally possess an innate 'grammar template' or universal grammar that allows them to select out the many grammatical rules of the language they hear spoken around them, they gradually construct the grammar of their own native language. It suggests the children construct grammar through a process of hypothesis test. For example, the past tense of verbs are formed by adding –ed, so a child says "goed". Eventually children revise their hypothesis to accommodate exception of the past tense of irregular verbs. Children create sentences by using rules rather than by merely repeating what they have heard.

The innatist theory is mainly concerned with first language acquisition. It asserts that human have access to the knowledge that is processed innately. The protagonists of the nativist position of language acquisition aim to explain first language acquisition, not second language acquisition. Quite a few researchers in this camp doubt that UG (Universal Grammar) is available for second language acquisition, from this moment it has been clearly differentiated that acquisition is related to first language (L1 – mother tongue) whereas learning has to do with second and foreign languages. Some theorists argue that UG may be available for second language acquisition up to a critical age only (early puberty) after which the plasticity of the brain would put an end to the beneficial workings of UG. We must remember, too, that second language learning is different from foreign language learning. Second language learning takes place in a target language environment and provides the learners with plenty of language input in contextually meaningful situations. In contrast, foreign language learning takes place under extreme time limits in a first language cultural context and provides comparatively poor environmental conditions for language acquisition.

Because of the reasons just mentioned it is problematic to directly connect nativist theories of language acquisition with new developments in FLT (Foreign Language Teaching). The truth is, though, that nativist theories have definitely influenced theories on the so-called -second language acquisition- and they have indirectly had an effect on theories and methods in FLT. The perhaps most prominent example of such indirect influences and subterranean cross currents is the 'comprehensible input hypothesis' (a.k.a. The Monitor Model) developed by Stephen Krashen. His theory of second language acquisition actually consists of five main hypotheses: 1. the acquisition-learning hypothesis, 2. the monitor hypothesis, 3. the natural order hypothesis, 4. the input hypothesis, and 5. the affective filter hypothesis. His position shares with nativist theories the learning - acquisition dichotomy. The crucial point of his arguments is that grammar acquisition is an unconscious process which cannot really be helped or replaced by the teaching and conscious learning of explicit rules of grammar. What teachers can do to help their learners is make comprehensible the second language input which they provide because learners will find it easier to figure out the rules underlying the production of the input if they understand its meaning.

*** Some theorists like Krashen used the terminology “second language acquisition” as they believed that any person would acquire a new language (L2) in the same way as they acquired their first language.
In future texts this Monitor Model (Comprehensible Input) will be analyzed in depth; however, at this stage a very brief introduction to these five hypotheses will be provided:

The first, Acquisition- Learning hypothesis, states that children acquire their L1 naturally from the world around them; accordingly, in order for students to acquire L2, teachers must focus on communication rather than memorization of rules.

The second hypothesis, the Monitor hypothesis, sees that L2 learners could use their Monitor to check the language they producing. In other words, when learners know the rules of the language, they can employ them to correct what they are thinking about, for example, adding –s to the third person in the present tense verbs.

The third is the Natural Order hypothesis which states that the rules of the L2 grammatical system are learned in a specific natural order. That is, all learners pass through the same natural or order of acquisition; (a) preproduction or the silent period - no words, (b) early production - one-to-two word sentences, (c) speech emergence - three-to-four word sentences, (d) and intermediate fluency - errors are developmental and students will outgrow them as they are exposed to what is appropriate or correct.

The fourth is the Input hypothesis which claims that for acquisition to take place learners must be presented with comprehensible input, i.e. the language they can understand, just slightly beyond their current level of competency (i + 1).

The final hypothesis in Krashen's theory is the Affective Filter hypothesis. It states that the most important affective variable favoring second language acquisition are student’s motivation to learn the language, a low anxiety learning environment, self-confidence, and self-esteem.

To sum up, the innatist theory proposes that the ability to learn language is inborn, that the nature is more important than nurture and that experience using language is only necessary in order to activate the LAD. However, one problem with Chomsky's theory is that it does not take enough account of the influence that thought (cognition) and language have on each other's development.

Although this theory provides what some claim is a reasonable explanation about acquiring language, this theory lack sufficient evidence. Some of the cases against this theory include, “timing of language learning varies greatly within cultures, environment shapes how much and what language is learned,” (Cooter & Reutzel, 2004).