Degrees of Certainty

Overview

It is a common mistake to present something as a proven fact when it is actually an opinion. In a serious piece of academic writing you should not, for example, write Girls are better at learning language than boys. You could write, instead, there is some evidence to suggest that girls may be better at learning languages than boys OR it can be argued that girls are better at learning languages than boys.

Some other expressions that are useful when presenting ideas that may be true but not proven facts:

- **It may not be the case that** girls are naturally better at foreign languages.
- **It would seem / appear that** girls are more interested in languages than boys.
- **We can presume that** all humans have the ability to learn a second language. [believe something to be true because it seems very likely]
- We can draw the **tentative** conclusion that early language skills determine how successful a child will be at school. [possible, not certain]

**It is true or almost certainly true**

- **It is undoubtedly** true that language ability is not simply a matter of intelligence. [without doubt]
- **It is, of course,** essential to check data carefully. [shows the writer sees this as obvious]
- **It is evident** that girls and boys develop at slightly different rates. [obvious, clear]
- The best age for language learning is, **apparently**, the teenage years

**The writer is unsure**

- The research has **allegedly** come to some very significant conclusions. [it is claimed, use of this adverb suggests that the writer does not believe the claims are true]
- **Boys are considered to be** more inclined to take risks than girls. [people think that – the implication is that the write may not agree]
- The **perception** of boys as poor language learns can be shown to be false. [common view, often one which the writer feels is inappropriate in some way]
• In the absence of evidence to the contrary we can assume that Liang (2008) is correct. [as there is no evidence to suggest the opposite].

Practice Exercises

Exercise 1
Complete the table a~h. Do not fill the shaded boxes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Adverb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Tendency</td>
<td>Tend</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence</td>
<td></td>
<td>b)</td>
<td>c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seem</td>
<td></td>
<td>d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Likely</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f)</td>
<td>Perceive</td>
<td>g)</td>
<td>h)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exercise 2
Change these sentences. Use different forms of the words in bold.

1) There is little likelihood that everyone will fail the test. (adjective)
2) Students tend to leave preparation for exams till the last minute. (noun)
3) We saw evidence that some students had copied each other’s answers. (adjective)
4) The melting of the polar ice caps seems to be inevitable. (adverb)

Answers

Exercise 1
evident; evidently; seemingly; likelihood; perception; perceptible; perceptibly

Exercise 2
it is not very likely/highly unlikely; have a tendency; it was evident