

Explicit versus Implicit Grammar Instruction

Shaghayegh Shirzad

Department of English Language and literature, Ayatollah Amoli Branch, Islamic Azad University, Amol, Iran

Corresponding author's email: shaghayegh_shirzad2010@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

In the acquisition of a second/foreign language, the role of focus-on-form has been asserted over the last two decades, it is still fundamental to figure out how second/foreign language students receive the information suggested by such explicit instruction and how it applies in processing and producing a number of linguistic structures and forms. A strong support for the argument has been appeared that concentrating on linguistic form which draws students' attention to linguistic components in the classroom context, could be beneficial for learners. Altogether, a lot of investigators advocated teaching that concentrates on linguistic form as being effective for second/foreign language learning in promoting the noticing of particular structures in the input. The present study distinguishes between explicit and implicit instruction as well as different interface position. The findings have implication in the EFL and ESL context.

KEYWORDS: *Implicit instruction, explicit learning, interface position, grammar*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, there have been many shifts in second/foreign instruction. The major change is the shift from an explicit emphasis on language itself to focus on the expression and comprehension of meaning through language. The theoretical background of the communicatively-oriented approach can be based on Krashen's (1981) *Input Hypothesis* and *Natural Approach* which express that in order to successfully acquire a second language, L2 learners need to be exposed to comprehensible input and motivation to acquire L2 proficiency.

Generally, two methods for teaching grammar within an EFL/ESL context have been suggested: Implicit/Inductive and Explicit/Deductive. "implicit" suggests a 'bottom up' approach, in which students discover grammar rules while working through exercises/tasks, while "explicit" suggests a 'top down' approach, which is the standard teaching approach that has a teacher explaining rules to the students. There is still, however, controversy over the relative effectiveness of explicit and implicit grammar teaching (Thornbury, 2006).

In the SLA literature, a distinction between implicit and explicit learning and processing is often invoked. According to Ellis (2002), implicit learning is defined as "acquisition of knowledge about the underlying structure of a complex stimulus environment by a process which takes place naturally, simply and without conscious operations. As DeKeyser (1995) defined implicit learning as "learning of rules underlying the complicated pattern of occurrence of forms without consciously thinking about the rules" (p. 84).

Also, implicit learning is defined as learning that occurs "without concurrent awareness of what is learned through memorization of instances, inferring of rules without awareness or both" (DeKeyser, 1995, p. 380).

Characteristics of implicit learning accordingly include the absence of consciousness or awareness or of the operation of rules.

In contrast explicit learning has been defined by different scholars:

Ellis (1994) defined this type of learning as a more conscious operation where the individual makes and tests hypotheses in a search for structure (p. 1); also, according to DeKeyser (1995), explicit learning occurs with concurrent awareness of what is being learned. This implies - as long as generalization takes place and not just memorization of instances - that some sort of rule is being thought about during the learning process ... (p. 380).

Reber (1993) has argued that implicit learning is effective when the rule domain is complex, but explicit learning could be effective when the rule domain is simple (and the properties of rules are salient). As Krashen (1981) has argued that implicit learning is superior, since easy rules are learnable but hard rules must be "acquired" - that is, induced unconsciously.

IMPLICIT/EXPLICIT VERSUS INDUCTIVE/DEDUCTIVE LEARNING

According to DeKeyser (1995), the dichotomy of implicit/explicit learning process is closely associated with inductive/deductive learning issues. Although, the relation between the implicit/explicit and the inductive/deductive is not essentially direct, the two distinguishing points often coincide with each other in practice (p. 85).

Definitions of these two distinctions are as follows:

Inductive: "examples are seen before the rule is inferred (implicitly or explicitly)";

Deductive: "the rules are given before any examples are seen";

Implicit: "no rules are formulated";

Explicit: "rules are formulated (either by the teacher or the student, either before or after examples/practice)" (DeKeyser, 1995, p. 85).

Also, DeKeyser (1995) points out that while induction can be either implicit or explicit (and explicit induction can happen with or without help from a teacher or textbook), deductive learning is necessarily explicit (even though the degree of explicitness - or elaborateness).

THEORETICAL POSITION OF IMPLICIT AND EXPLICIT KNOWLEDGE

Based on the previous claim, acquiring without attention is not probable and the inclusion of explicit instruction in a content-based classroom is essential. Learners getting explicit instruction, like as implicit exposure to form, appears to have the best of both worlds (MacWhinney, 1997, p. 278). Although, there has been a constant question in the research of second/foreign language learning and pedagogy with relation to the effect that explicit instruction of grammar may have on second/foreign language learning. The way in which this implicit knowledge is built up most efficiently is still a matter of considerable argument. These studies fail to demonstrate how explicit instruction leads to explicit rule formulation in students, promoting higher levels of achievement. That is, whether knowledge typically starts out as explicit information can be used automatically (ibid).

Fundamentally, there are two points of view in this debate. One is that implicit knowledge cannot be acquired as the result of explicit learning, which is known as the non-interface position. The other point of view, referred to as interface position, states that implicit second/foreign knowledge can be learned through or accelerated by explicit knowledge.

NON-INTERFACE POSITION

The excluding reason of metalinguistic and form-focused instruction in the natural approach is characterized by Krashen's (1981) strong support of a non-interface position in relation to explicit and implicit knowledge. Krashen points out that implicit and explicit knowledge are distinctive and that implicit knowledge can only be fostered by giving second/foreign language students large amounts of 'comprehensible input' (ibid). Also, Hulstijn (2002) differentiates these two kinds of knowledge in terms of accessibility: "in the implicit case, students know a rule intuitively while in the explicit one, they are able to verbalize a rule in sophisticated metalinguistic terms" (p. 195). Based on this distinction, implicit knowledge may be subconsciously accessible to students while explicit knowledge is accessible to students as a conscious representation in order that students enable to mention what it is that they know. In conclusion, explicit knowledge can only be accessed for performance via a controlled process while implicit knowledge is available in an automatic way.

Due to Krashen (1981), in the *acquisition-learning hypothesis*, there is a basic distinction between acquisition (implicit knowledge) and learning (explicit knowledge). Explicit knowledge may assist students in specific types of language performance in the monitoring form but it cannot assist them to learn implicit knowledge. Krashen point out that acquisition is a subconscious process and a student focuses on meaning first while acquisition follows as a by-product of processing language for meaning. Implicit knowledge cannot be acquired as the result of explicit learning by means of explicit instruction nor can it indirectly be influenced by explicit knowledge of L2 learners (ibid).

Krashen (1981) questions the effectiveness of any rule-learning or focus on form and stresses that any spontaneous use of a rule is the result of a completely independent, implicit process of acquisition, resulting from exposure to large amounts of comprehensible, meaningful input (p. 619). He thinks that all efforts to draw students' attention to formal anomalies would demotivate them from producing output in second/foreign language, which in turn would inhibit acquisition. Thus, based on his views, it seems to be impossible to lead students to become fluent in the second/foreign language learning through grammar instruction. Students can only acquire implicit knowledge by receiving large amounts of exposure to 'comprehensible input'. On the other hand, acquisition is core and learning is

peripheral. Students can merely enhance second/foreign communicative abilities through instruction that more closely resembles the features of a 'natural' environment.

INTERFACE POSITION

However, Krashen (1981) points out that there is no way for either explicit or implicit knowledge to be gradually restructured from one form of representation to another and there is no interface between learning (which takes place consciously with explicit instruction) and acquisition (which takes place subconsciously, typically through mere exposure to the target language in natural, meaning-oriented settings), these two kinds of knowledge may still be related; thus, explicit knowledge should be regarded significant for inter-language development (Robinson, 1996). It appears that some grammatical forms cannot be acquired exclusively on the foundation of comprehensible input and that formal instruction may be essential to be certain that students gain the data they require to acquire these forms. Second/foreign language students may achieve significant success in contexts where they are simply exposed to meaningful, naturalistic input; although, such input alone does not essentially lead students to high degrees of accuracy or high levels of proficiency (Swain, 1988, p. 70).

The inclusion of explicit knowledge in communication-focused instruction has been advocated by an important number of previous studies in second/foreign language, despite Krashen's claims to the contrary. The reports indicate that a focus on form in context or form-focused instruction in general has demonstrated vast potential for improving the students' language output accuracy, thus increasing the rate of second/foreign language. According to Long (1985), the student in a more 'active' role, assuming that the formal features of language must be consciously registered by the learner for successful language acquisition to occur. It is believed that implicit second/foreign knowledge can be learned through or facilitated by explicit knowledge.

Some investigators claim that conscious processing of grammatical forms is core and argue that second/foreign language can be learned by conscious attention to form in the input (Doughty, 1991; Long, 1985; Spada, 1997).

According to MacWhinney (1997), the relation between psychology and second/foreign language acquisition and points out that "concept learning with advance organizers and clues is always better than learning without clues" (p. 278). Learners are more likely to allocate their attention to specific types of input by being exposed to implicit instruction on forms. In addition, from the viewpoint of cognitive psychologists, learners are able to make correct judgments on new grammatical rules because they develop an idiosyncratic rule system of limited scope. This they hold in their consciousness which permits them to differentiate grammatical from ungrammatical strings and elaborate their judgment (Long, 1985, p. 31).

Although, this leads us to consider the question of "how to convert explicit/declarative knowledge which is analyzed, abstract, and explanatory into implicit/procedural knowledge that is unanalyzed and intuitive" (Bialystok, 1981, p. 34). The interface position comes in a strong and a weak form. In its strongest form, this interface position considers explicit, declarative knowledge to be convertible into implicit knowledge through practice. This strong version of the interface position is based cognitive psychology literature, particularly, theories of controlled and automatic processing (Anderson, 1980).

STRONG INTERFACE POSITION

As Anderson (1980, p. 273) claims "the transition of declarative to procedural knowledge takes place in three stages". Firstly, students require to be involved in conscious mental activities that are meaningful in context and initiate to familiarize themselves with various dimensions of language use. However, the learners might not be able to utilize the learned knowledge perfectly and correctly, their language production will become more proficient as the declarative knowledge is turned into the procedural form. Once learners reach the autonomous stage, they have no difficulties in using the language for functional purposes without referring to underlined rules and are able to process new information during their performance (Anderson, 1980).

Although, this position has been very common in empirical L2 acquisition research and in second/foreign language pedagogy, it could run up against the issue of learnability. Drawing from the notion of learnability consistent with Pienemann's (1985, p. 52) "*teachability hypothesis*" which attests to the "developmental sequences in second language acquisition", Ellis (1994, p. 92) postulates that explicit knowledge can be converted into implicit knowledge in terms of practice only if second language students are at the phase where they are developmentally ready to acquire the linguistic form. On the other hand, second language students are not able to internalize new structural knowledge in a manner that enables them to use it productively until they are ready to do so. As Pienemann (1985) tried to plan a syllabus based on learnability and teachability in the communicatively orientated classroom. He was able to propose a pedagogical approach that struck a balance between depending completely upon a language-based curriculum and on one that is 'content-based' and leaves the acquisition of linguistic form

and structure to take care of itself. He provides a rationale for a syllabus based on a developmental sequence through which learners gradually master a series of processing operations responsible for their language production. In such a syllabus, second language structures are introduced which have proven to be communicatively effective in natural second language development. The focus on meaning can be maintained in the instruction while the required second language items are selected and graded due to their developmental stages.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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