

Perspectives and Studies on Instructed Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

There have been debates over how grammar should be taught: whether explicit or implicit instruction would yield higher benefit for language learners. This paper discusses studies in SLA with regard to the grammar teaching methods. Although grammar should be taught so that L2 learners can pass through developmental sequences and gain implicit knowledge useful for real-life communication, current research has revealed empirical evidence that certain grammatical structures can be taught explicitly, and formed-focused grammar instruction would be helpful in terms of “noticing” and “consciousness raising”.

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The field of cognitive psychology has brought about debates over the role of explicit versus implicit language learning and the question as to whether such learning occurs through the conscious processing of information or through unconscious processes when people are exposed to language input (Bialystok: 1994; N. Ellis: 1994). Krashen (1981) claimed that language acquisition should occur through natural exposure, not through formal instruction. Thus, it was believed that formal grammar instruction would contribute merely to the declarative knowledge of grammatical structures, not the ability to use language forms correctly, and that an interface between these two types of knowledge did not exist as they were different systems in the brain.

Evidence from studies on the first language acquisition led to the claim that if formal instruction is necessary for L1 learners to learn languages, it is not necessary for L2 learners as well (Krashen: 1981). Similar claims were also made in the context of Universal Grammar (UG) and its application to SLA. It was argued that “if UG is accessible to learners, then L2 learning, like L1 learning, occurs mainly through the interaction of UG principles with input” (Nassaji and Fotos: 2004).

Current research in SLA, however, has resulted in the reevaluation of grammar in the L2 classroom. First of all, Schmidt (1990, 1993) suggests that “noticing,” his theory involving conscious attention to form, is a necessary condition for language learning. Despite scepticism, it has been generally agreed that noticing or awareness of target forms plays a vital role in L2 learning (Bialystok: 1994; Ellis: 2002). Also, language learners are unable to process target language input for both meaning and form simultaneously. Therefore, learners need to notice target forms in input, or they would process input for meaning only and do not attend to specific forms, leading to failure to process and acquire them.

Furthermore, there has been empirical evidence that L2 learners pass through developmental sequences. Pienemann (1984) developed *teachability hypothesis*, which suggests that whereas certain developmental sequences are fixed and therefore unalterable through formal instruction of grammar, other structures can be learned through teaching any time they are taught. This hypothesis posits that developmental sequences can be influenced favorably through instruction if the teaching of grammar coincides with the L2 learner’s readiness to the next developmental stage of language proficiency (Lightbown, 2000).

Due to a large body of research pointing to the inadequacies of teaching approaches where meaning-focused communication is emphasised, form-focused grammar instruction received renewed interest. Extensive research by Swain and other researchers revealed that the students in French immersion programme did not achieve accuracy in certain grammatical forms, even though they had undergone long periods of exposure to meaningful input (Nassaji and Fotos, 2004).

Moreover, there has been evidence from a large number of laboratory and classroom-based studies showing the positive effects of grammar instruction. For example, Lightbown and Spada (1990) investigated the effects of explicit instruction on the development of specific target language forms. Nassaji and Swain (2000) also studied the effects of corrective feedback on L2 learner errors. These studies indicate that instruction of grammar has a significant positive effect on learners' accuracy. Additionally, Norris and Ortega (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of studies on the effectiveness of L2 instruction. While explicit instruction includes presenting the structure, describing and exemplifying it, and giving rules for its use, implicit instruction usually consists of communicative exposure to the target form. From the study, it was found that explicit instruction contributed to substantial, durable gains in the learning of target language structures when compared to implicit instruction.

However, there is still controversy over the relative importance of explicit grammar instruction. This is because the relationship between teaching and learning is quite complicated; how something is taught is not directly related to how something is learned. Denying the importance of explicit instruction in language acquisition, Krashen (1993), for instance, describes the effects of grammar instruction as "peripheral and fragile" (725). He argued that explicit knowledge about grammatical structures and rules may never change into implicit knowledge, which underlies unconscious language comprehension and production. Truscott (1996) also denied the value of explicit instruction, arguing that its effects were short-lived and superficial; also, grammar instruction alone may not enhance genuine knowledge of language.

Even some advocates of explicit grammar instruction suggested that although form-focus instruction results in learning, it may not directly lead to implicit knowledge or to immediate changes in the learner's interlanguage (R. Ellis, 2002). Though not rejecting the value of explicit instruction, N. Ellis (2002) suggests that language learning requires extended, continuous practice that cannot be achieved through the instruction of a few declarative grammar rules (175).

Despite the negative views against grammar instruction, it is suggested that learners have opportunities to use instructed forms in their various form-meaning relationships so that the forms can become part of their interlanguage system (Nassaji and Fotos, 2004). According to Spada (1997), when receiving formal instruction focusing on communicative exposure to grammar points, learners develop awareness of the forms that becomes longer-lasting and can use forms more accurately. R. Ellis (2002) also suggests that with extensive grammar instruction that is sustained over a long period of time, learners' implicit knowledge can be developed as measured by performance on free production tasks, and accuracy in the use of difficult forms such as articles can be promoted. Current research strongly supports the need for instructed grammar forms through meaningful communication as intervention points in a task-based communicative curriculum (R. Ellis, 2003). According to Skehan (1998), instruction provides structured input that facilitates "noticing" by increasing awareness of language features, and the more frequent a salient language form is taught or repeated, the greater number of opportunities for noticing exist.

Conclusion

Current research indicates that L2 learners need opportunities to encounter and produce grammatical structures which can be taught explicitly or introduced implicitly through frequent exposure. Form-focus explicit instruction, even though it does not guarantee learning or acquisition, is still necessary so that learners' consciousness can be raised and, through extensive practice, their use of forms can improve. Cohesive ties, for instance, which are concrete forms in texts, should be introduced through explicit instruction and feedback in a way that promote form-meaning relationships. With the influence of cultural rhetorical and discourse traditions in L2 writing, extensive and persistent instruction in L2 grammar and the complex feature of L2 texts are required (Hinkel, 2002). In addition, according to Hinkel (2002), instruction in L2 writing should include explicit instruction on grammar, lexical forms and rhetorical patterns as exemplified by authentic text and discourse, and grammar should not be treated separately from the teaching of writing. In the recent approaches to grammar, therefore, emphasis is placed on the need for provision of extensive exposure to, as well as focus on, the target forms to promote their acquisition.

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