

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 9 : 10 October 2009

ISSN 1930-2940

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Explicit Grammar Instruction

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Abstract

In the field of SLA, following grammar instruction, the explicit-implicit dimension has long been one of the controversial issues and focuses for researchers. It provides relatively fresh theoretical as well as empirical view angle to formal grammar instruction. This paper reviews both theories of explicit-implicit issues and empirical studies on formal explicit and implicit grammar teaching, and presents some issues like explicit/implicit knowledge and interface debate that require to be noticed and attached much importance to these studies, expecting to provide some help to the future research and to the real SLA classroom settings.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, grammar instruction has long been a controversial issue in the field of second language and foreign language acquisition. It has been of great interest to researchers and teachers that whether grammar should be taught and how to teach grammar if it is necessary. Focused on these two key questions, grammar instruction has undergone its ups and downs through many linguistic schools and pedagogical approaches, in the process of which the necessity of grammar instruction is no longer the focus, and the explicit-implicit dimension in grammar teaching has received more attention. Many empirical studies have investigated that which method is better for grammar teaching, explicit or implicit (Scott, 1989; Zhou, 1989; Scott, 1990; Gao & Dai, 2004; Tian, 2005; Xia, 2005) and whether there is an interface between explicit grammatical knowledge and implicit grammatical knowledge (Zhou, 1989; Green & Hetch, 1992; Gao & Dai, 2004; cited in Xiao-fei & Tian, 2008).

What is grammar? According to Rob Bastone (1994), grammar is multi-dimensional: grammar is a formal mechanism, a functional system from signaling meanings, or a dynamic resource which both users and learners call on in different ways at different times. The teaching of grammar has been the focus of language teachers and learners for many years.

The main goal of grammar teaching is to enable learners to achieve linguistic competence; learners use grammar as a tool or resource for comprehension, and creation of oral and written discourse efficiently, effectively, and appropriately depending on the situation (Huang, 2005).

Explicit approach

In SLA, different types of approaches have been documented to facilitate L2 acquisition in diverse contexts. Ellis (1994) proposed three methods for L2 learners to engage in L2 learning depending on the requirements of the learning situation: giving rules explicitly through assimilating rules following instruction, explicitly-selective learning in terms of searching for information, building, and then testing hypotheses, or implicitly or unconsciously-automatically acquiring the structural nature of the material derived from experience of specific instances. Winitz (1996) on the other side suggested four general types of approaches to SLA of L2 grammar: the explicit learning of the target language structures, implicit acquisition of the target language structures, implicit acquisition combined with the explicit learning of the target language structures in order to monitor implicitly acquired grammatical principles, and a preliminary phase of implicit acquisition of the target language structures in order to enhance explicit learning of grammatical principles.

Despite the development of these various instruction approaches to SLA, there may be no single approach to SLA appropriately applied in all contexts to the varying types of learners that L2 teachers face (Winitz, 1996; Fotos, 2002). Instead, at the core of these different instruction approaches to SLA, two key contrasting and independent concepts have been commonly involved: explicit and implicit.

While these two types of approaches have raised a number of controversial issues regarding the effects of SLA, a number of recent studies have taken stronger views about the advantages of explicit instruction approaches to SLA of L2 grammar especially in the EFL situation due to the features and merits of the explicit approach (Fotos, 2002).

What is explicit approach?

Various definitions of an explicit approach have been provided in SLA. Ellis (1994) states that explicit learning refers to "conscious searching, building then testing of hypotheses; assimilating a rule following explicit instruction". Dekeyser (1995) calls formal instruction explicit if explanation of grammatical rules comprises part of the instructional treatment (deduction) or if learners are directed to attend to particular forms and try to generate the rules themselves (induction). While Williams (1998) defines explicit learning as the situation in which learners intend to learn and when they are aware of what they have learned, Rosa and O'Neill (1999), based on cognitive psychology, view explicit learning as "the condition in which learners are instructed to look for rules underlying the input".

Moreover, Winitz (1996) defines the explicit acquisition of grammatical structures as "a language learning process in which the rules of L2 grammar are learned as formal statements". So, an explicit instruction involves language rules which either demonstrates

language rules in a straightforward manner, or directs learners to find these rules by themselves (Catherine 2003 as cited in Kong, 2005) or an explicit approach can be defined as a consciously rule-searching and instructed input processing, occurring when learners consciously search for rules or apply them to the stimulus domain (Robinson, 1997).

Why an Explicit approach

A number of researchers have investigated many obvious advantages and crucial functions of conscious learning in SLA (Green & Hecht, 1992). Krashen (1982), in his Monitor Theory, stated that "learned grammatical principles function to edit or monitor language output that has been generated by acquired rules" (as cited in Winitz, 1996, p. 3). Also, "conscious learning is only available as a monitor to modify an utterance after it has been initiated by the unconscious acquired system" (Krashen, p. 4, as cited in Green & Hecht, 1992). Schmidt (1995) claimed that "explicit, conscious noticing is necessary to subsequent learning, and therefore learners in all conditions who claim to have noticed rules should outperform those who do not" (as cited in Robinson, 1997, p. 56).

It goes without saying that an explicit approach can not only help learners draw more learners' attention and exploit pedagogical grammar in this regard but also is fully and clearly expressed, defined or formulated, and readily observable (Doughty & Williams, 1998) and also explicit grammar instruction can solve problems with purely communicative driven approaches, and can provide three important parts of the grammar lesson such as explicit grammar instruction preferably at the beginning of the lesson, communicative activities containing many usages of the instructed form, and summary activities to focus learners' attention on the grammar form they were instructed on and then encountered communicatively (Doughty & Williams).

Moreover, explicit instruction can help learners not only acquire high levels of accuracy in the target language, but also activate their metalinguistic knowledge of the target structures (Fotos, 2002). Finally, in the absence of explicit instruction, the learners can continuously use incorrect forms (fossilization) (Klapper and Rees, 2003). It is worth mentioning that L2 learners can benefit from explicit instruction approach over implicitly meaning focused or purely communicative-driven approaches (Fotos, 2002).

In SLA, experimental studies carried out to investigate the comparative effects of an explicit versus implicit approach, the superiority of explicit instruction over implicit processes has been acknowledged (Cadierno-Lopez, 1992; VanPatten and Cadierno, 1993; DeKeyser, 1997; Rosa and O'Neill, 1999; Spada 1997). Results from these studies show that explicit instruction is found to be more effective in terms of quantity, accuracy, and progress rate than implicit instruction in classroom-based instructional settings. Much research has reported that

when L2 learners are given explicit explanation of grammar rules, their rate of using accurate forms is greatly increased (e.g. Sheen, 2003; Klapper and Rees).

Implicit Versus Explicit Knowledge

Although a number of recent researchers have investigated what the relationship between these two types of L2 linguistic knowledge is and how L2 learners acquire these two types of linguistic knowledge and organize in the brain, In second and foreign language learning, grammatical knowledge is generally agreed to be stored both implicitly and explicitly (Bialystok, 1981; R. Ellis, 1993). In SLA, it is said that L2 learners make two types of separate and independent L2 linguistic knowledge: implicit and explicit L2 knowledge.

The distinction between implicit and explicit knowledge has a long, well-accepted history (Bialystok, 1981). Similar distinctions appear in epistemology and psychology: personal knowledge/objective knowledge (Polanyi, 1958); belief/knowledge (Scheffler, 1965); know how/know that (Ryle, 1949); and figurative knowledge/operative knowledge (Piaget, 1954).

R. Ellis (1994) asserts the incontrovertible nature of this distinction. In contrast, Reber (1993) points out that this distinction is not an absolute one. However, he concedes that the differences between these types of knowledge are significant enough for the distinction to be drawn and for it to serve as an important theoretical construct.

Explicit knowledge

Many of our abilities are dependent on our conscious awareness of how to carry out a certain task, e.g., doing multiplication, playing chess, or using a computer (N. Ellis, 1994). The knowledge that is conscious in nature and analyzable (Bialystok, 1981; R. Ellis, 1993). This conscious awareness is explicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is defined in terms of awareness: it is the conscious mental representations that a learner forms. It is "analyzed," "abstract," and "explanatory" (R. Ellis, 1994, p. 84). Because it is analyzed, this knowledge can be categorized (R. Ellis, 1994) and organized (Bialystok, 1981). It is also L2 grammar knowledge about which L2 learners consciously recognize rules existing in an analyzed form so that they can report their metalingual knowledge (Ellis, 2004). Or "the conscious awareness of what a language or language in general conscious of and/or of the roles that it plays in human life" (Ellis, p. 229).

This explicit knowledge is not an attitude because it can be viewed as the outcome of such an attitude, not a practice or activity because what a person knows explicitly differs from the actual uses, and not a pedagogic construct (Ellis). Explicit L2 knowledge is often associated with effortful processing and is sometimes used as a synonym for declarative knowledge (Hulstijn, 2005). Moreover, explicit knowledge can be operationalized as the

learners' explanation of specific linguistic features (Ellis, 2005). According to Ellis (2005), this explicit L2 knowledge has the characteristics as follows:

(1) explicit knowledge is conscious; (2) explicit knowledge is declarative; (3) L2 learners' declarative rules are often imprecise and inaccurate; (4) the development of learners' explicit knowledge can take on two planes; (5) explicit knowledge is generally accessible through controlled processing; (6) any language task that a learner finds difficult may naturally result in an attempt to exploit explicit knowledge; (7) explicit knowledge is potentially verbalizable; and (8) explicit knowledge is learnable. (pp. 235-240)

Implicit knowledge

On the other side, implicit L2 knowledge is defined as L2 grammar knowledge that is intuitive and automatic and can be rapidly accessed for use in unplanned language use (Hinkel & Fotos, 2002), cannot be directly reported, and that most speakers have of there are also cases where learning has taken place but where it has failed to become acquisition; and even the best learners can master only a small subset of the grammatical rules of the L2 (as cited in Cadierno-Lopez, 1992).

Also, implicit L2 knowledge is information that is automatically and spontaneously used in language tasks and that the bulk of a native speaker's grammatical competence is comprised of (Brown, 2000). Implicit knowledge can be determined by examining the learners' use of these features in oral or written language (Ellis, 2005). It is a kind of knowledge that develops apart from awareness of the mechanisms involved in its development (N. Ellis, 1993).

There has been a longstanding debate about the relationship between these two types of knowledge and in particular the value of explicit knowledge to the instructed second and foreign language learner. Teachers and researchers have long questioned whether the learning process lends itself to the development of explicit knowledge, and if so, if that knowledge aids learners in actual language production (Alderson et al, 1997; Green and Hecht, 1992; Han and Ellis, 1998; Seliger, 1979).

This debate concerning the value of explicit knowledge to instructed learners is reflected in the differing language teaching methodologies that held sway in the last century and the philosophies behind them. Until World War II, the grammar-translation method, which placed great emphasis on deductive learning and explicit instruction, was widely used. The goal of the explicit instruction that characterized the grammar-translation method was explicit knowledge (as cited in Tucker, 2007). This approach was based on the notion that explicit knowledge can lead to fluency (N. Ellis, 1993).

Interface debate

The interface hypothesis “claims that explicit knowledge can be converted into implicit knowledge as a result of practicing specific features of the L2. It provides a clear justification for teaching explicit linguistic knowledge” (Ellis 2005, p. 54).

The relationships between the explicit and implicit L2 knowledge in SLA have been investigated in terms of three distinct cognitive perspectives: the no interface, the strong interface, and the weak interface position (Ellis, 2005). Each of these positions claims a different role for explicit knowledge in the course of acquiring implicit knowledge.

The no interface position was strongly supported by the learning/acquisition hypothesis of Krashen’s (1982) Monitor theory of SLA. This position states that Explicit and implicit knowledge are separate from each other and associated with the concepts of acquisition and learning (Krashen’s, 1982). According to this position, explicit knowledge cannot be converted into implicit knowledge. The no interface position is the result of the parallelism between L1 and L2 (Andringa, 2005). Therefore, this position contends that implicit and explicit L2 knowledge involve different acquisition mechanisms, are stored in different parts of the brain, and are processed for performance by different processes, either automatic and controlled (Ellis, 2005).

The next position is weak interface which shows that implicit and explicit knowledge are two separate systems. However, formal instruction can become effective if it is properly timed so that it can enable explicit knowledge to become implicit. They argue that explicit knowledge can positively affect implicit learning processes. Explicit knowledge can become implicit if and when the language learner is developmentally ready (Andringa, 2005). Also, explicit knowledge contributes indirectly to the acquisition of implicit knowledge by promoting some of the processes believed to be responsible; and learners can use their explicit knowledge to produce output that then serves as auto-input to their implicit learning mechanisms (Sharwood Smith, 1981, as cited in Ellis, 2005).

The last position is the strong interface in which learned or explicit knowledge can be not only derived from acquired or implicit knowledge, but also can be converted into acquired or implicit knowledge for learners to have the opportunity and motivation to automatize new rules through practice (Cadierno-Lopez, 1992; Ellis, 2005). Among supporters of this, there is disagreement on what types of practice can better facilitate the transformation from explicit to implicit knowledge and whether this practice can be mechanical or needs to be communicative in nature (Ellis, 2005).

In sum, while the strong interface position stresses automatization processes, the weak interface position argues that there can be an interface between explicit and implicit knowledge, but posits constraints. On the other hand, the no interface position posits that explicit and implicit knowledge are two separate knowledge systems, resulting from two independent mechanisms of learning. (George, 2008)

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