

Exploring Explicit and Implicit Grammar Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The connection between the theory and practice of teaching grammar in English is important to understand in English language teaching. This study explores the different approaches towards teaching grammar in an EFL context by referring to key theories and studies on this topic. Recent research on second language acquisition and initial English language teacher education will also be discussed. The study aims at clarifying the differences between explicit grammar teaching and implicit grammar teaching to help English language teachers select the proper approach for their students.

Key words: SLA, ELT, EFL, Grammar Teaching

INTRODUCTION

The correct usage of grammar is achieved when learners are competent in using correct grammatical structure in an appropriate context (Hedge, 2014). However, the question of whether grammar should be taught implicitly or explicitly is one that is still being debated. Implicit instruction of grammar is considered the more dynamic of the two methods. This form of teaching focuses on fluency of the language instead of accuracy, achieving this through active learner involvement and interactive learning activities. Implicit instruction allows learners to be independent, and provides a more natural learning environment for second language acquisition. Implicit instruction also converts input into intake, as in L1 acquisition (Birsan, 2012).

On the other hand, explicit instruction is more technical and involves memorisation and rule-governed practice. While implicit instruction focuses on fluency, explicit instruction aims to teach the learner accurate production of speech with correct grammar. In order for learners to formulate a correct sentence, explicit rules in grammar are provided (Ling, 2015). In contrast to the autonomy and learner independence of implicit instruction, this method places the power and direction of the language lesson with the teacher.

There has been much debate over which of the above two methods are more effective in teaching grammar. This debate has arisen over claims over the difference in L1 and L2 acquisition. Some claim that acquisition of L1 is implicit and attained through experience of usage and not from explicit rules, while others claim that acquisition of L2 differs in that it is helped by the learner noticing and knowing grammatical rules (Krashen, 1982; Long 1988; McLaughlin, 1987;

Schmidt 1990). The late 20th Century saw much research into the effectiveness of either method of grammar instruction. The difference between fluency and accuracy in grammar has led researchers to re-examine how grammar is taught and how it is conceptualised by language teachers.

In a study conducted by Sopin (2015) investigating the attitudes of teachers towards grammar instruction in the classroom, all of the respondents in the study agreed that grammar teaching and accuracy are important in English language teaching. Sopin (2015) suggests that while 84% of the respondents were in favour of explicit instruction, 64% agreed that implicit instruction resulted in an increased difficulty of understanding grammar by the respondents' students. Nevertheless, he argues that all of the respondents agreed that grammar teaching should be contextualised in the classroom, with an explicit instruction of the rules communicated in an appropriate manner (Sopin, 2015).

Another study carried out by Soleimani, Jahangiri, and Gohar (2015) explored the effects of implicit and explicit instruction on the implicit knowledge of the past simple tense in English. Soleimani, Jahangiri, and Gohar (2015) note that participant knowledge of the past simple tense was tested using a timed grammaticality judgment task (TGJT) and an elicited oral imitation task (EOIT). They suggest that there were no differences in the test results between participants in both the implicit and explicit instruction group. Soleimani, Jahangiri, and Gohar (2015) concluded that explicit instruction is not superior to implicit instruction in acquisition of implicit knowledge of a second language.

This study aims at giving a clear understanding of the two main approach in grammar teacher, namely explicit and

implicit, in order to help English language teachers in the fields of EFL and ESL to select the most adequate method for their students.

APPROACHES AND METHODS IN GRAMMAR TEACHING

The extent to which explicit instruction (also known as meta-talk) is used in the classroom depends on different variables. These include the teacher's knowledge and experience of the language, as well as their attitude and methodology towards language learning. The experience and knowledge of the teacher is vital in the classroom. Most teachers utilise the Focus on Form (FoF) method of instruction, which is ideal for teachers confident in their grammatical knowledge. Teachers may not be as confident in other dynamic aspects of the language, such as cultural and colloquial knowledge, which can result in grammaticalisation of the language (Swan, 2005).

Grammar instruction is complicated further by the arbitrary nature of certain words. Students might accept what they are being taught even if they are confused. This is demonstrated by Bryson (1990) in his book *The Mother Tongue*, in which Bryson details his experience with learning English. Bryson (1990) notes that "Some of us managed to learn what we were taught. We accepted and memorized the statements of teachers who told us that 'English has eight parts of speech,' or 'English has nine [or was it eight?] tenses such as the preterit, the imperfect, the conditional, the progressive, the future, and so forth.'" (p. 137).

Alternatives to FoF instruction that focus more on verbalising grammatical rules may be used (Ellis, 1999). Similarly, if the cycle of "we teach as we have been taught rather than as we have been trained to teach" is to be broken, the mentality and cognition of teachers needs to be studied (Bailey et al., 1996). These two factors are vital in the study of language teaching. Studying the mentality and cognition of language teachers provides keys to understanding their choice of teaching method (Borg, 2005).

TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION

The initial education of English language teachers is also important to explore when changing the traditional classroom. In addition to education on pedagogy, the training of teachers also requires the promotion of critical thinking in the teachers' professional lives: "pre-service teacher education courses should help student teachers to be in more control of their professional development and provide them with the opportunity to approach the profession from a much broader perspective than as merely a method. Student teachers should be taught the skills and confidence to analyze and articulate their thinking" (Almazra, 1996).

The initial education of student teachers should include both pedagogical knowledge as well as practical, real-life classroom applications of this knowledge. In addition, student teachers need to be encouraged to develop critical thinking when analysing how this pedagogical knowledge can improve their teaching methods. By doing so, student

teachers become more autonomous in their control over how they teach languages. For example, after studying a topic such as 'acquisition of implicit and explicit knowledge of a language and how to teach grammar', student teachers may be assigned to research grammar teaching and discuss their findings with other student teachers. This will provide the student teachers the opportunity to observe real classes of English as a foreign language. The student teachers may discuss and compare their observations of the practical applications of the theories they learn. This will ultimately lead to a change in the mentality and cognition of these student teachers who will be better equipped with a more pragmatic education method. The application of teaching methods takes time to change, requiring a change in the thoughts and beliefs that form the cognition of the teacher (Borg, 2005). Change in classroom applications cannot occur overnight. Both professional knowledge in pedagogy as well as the practice of this knowledge are key in affecting the teacher's cognition.

In order to form a good knowledge of pedagogy, student teachers are required to research both the theory and practice of the topic. Additionally, the declarative knowledge of English as a foreign language needs to be developed by the student teachers. This declarative knowledge should only be limited to academic purposes, as an emphasis on other purposes will result in the student teacher's over-importance in grammar teaching in comparison with other aspects of the language. Thus, institutes where student teachers receive their training act to instil critical thinking in the minds of student teachers.

The linguist Shondel Nero highlights that language education focuses too much on the accuracy of the language form, which has limited the methods used to teach language in a classroom setting. Language learners thus find it difficult to apply what they already know about a language and attain fluency. Nero therefore proposes "a broader framework called Language Identity, Awareness and Development (LIAD) which goes beyond language as form, to foreign language teacher's awareness of students' knowledge and identities" (Nero, 2005). Both teacher knowledge and identity should be added to this framework in order to improve the teaching and learning of foreign languages. In order for change to occur in foreign language classes, new paradigms in the development of theories in foreign language acquisition are needed, together with a focus on the teacher-learner identity and pedagogical preparation by the teacher.

EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT GRAMMAR TEACHING

The traditional method of language teaching involves the teacher focusing on language form by explaining the rules of grammar and drilling these into the student using rote practice. This method places grammar as superior to other aspects of the language. An example of this method is using the audio-lingual method that utilises both positive and negative reinforcement when the student is learning the rules of the language. The student eventually grows weary of this method and, although capable of producing correct language

form on paper, continues to make errors when speaking the language in its context (Rhalmi, 2012). Therefore, the student is unable to use the language appropriately in contextualised scenarios where language fluency is more important than accuracy.

On the other hand, some teachers believe that students acquire the second language without any explicit mention of grammatical rules. In the same way that children learn their mother tongue, this method focuses on the unconscious use of language as opposed to a conscious method of learning which results in poor language fluency (Rhalmi, 2012). Teachers who use this method prioritise the use of language as opposed to its strict usage; not a focus on form, but on meaning and context. Activities and exercises using this method involve contextualised language instruction without reference to strict grammatical rules and language forms.

Implicit instruction results in procedural knowledge of grammar, whereas explicit instruction provides the learner with declarative knowledge. The latter fosters an active and conscious learning of grammar (Schmidt, 1990), while the former converts input into intake, as in L1 acquisition. Both methods of instruction result in automatising of grammar, so careful consideration needs to be made when choosing which method to pursue. Explicit instruction is appropriate for students who are struggling to acquire the second language. A strict set of grammatical rules may be seen as a key into understanding the logic of the grammatical composition of the language the student is learning. The linguist Diane Larsen-Freeman believes that "thinking of grammar as a skill or dynamic process rather than as a static area of knowledge is good both for explicit and implicit grammar acquisition. However, the question whether grammar acquisition leads to L2 acquisition is still under investigation. Therefore, as Rothstein states, language teachers need to think "How do we make grammar fun to learn, really, really fun, and memorable and meaningful? (Freeman, 2003).

In conclusion, language teaching can be improved by using both implicit and explicit instruction when teaching grammar. This can be supplemented by language teachers conducting research on the different methods used in teaching and critically analysing the different pedagogical techniques used in language education.

CONCLUSION

The debate on whether grammar should be taught explicitly or implicitly is still on-going and attracts the attention of researchers and English language teachers, especially in the field of second language acquisition. Both methods have enormous amount of research that support their effectiveness. Therefore, I believe there is no right or wrong answer to the questions of whether EFL teachers should employ explicit or implicit method when teaching grammar. This depends on many factors, including the teacher's knowledge, and the students level of proficiency in English. Moreover, Teachers might require training and development throughout their career in order to keep up with the trending approaches and methods in teaching grammar.

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