

A Review of Explicit and Implicit Grammar Instruction

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Abstract

This article attempts to review a thorny issue that arose in ancient times and continues to attract the attention of modern researchers: the effective way for teaching grammar. Divergences loom large. Some go as far as to claim that grammar instruction has no effect on linguistic proficiency. Others believe that it is beneficent to focus on form either in deductive, inductive, explicit or implicit ways. Still others believe in combining methods in any teaching operation in order to enhance the learners' acquisition of grammatical rules.

ملخص

يتناول هذا المقال مسألة شائكة أسالت الكثير من المداد منذ العصور القديمة ومازالت تستقطب اهتمام الدارسين إلى يومنا هذا تمثلت في كيفية تدريس القواعد النحوية للمتعلمين. هناك من يرى أنه لا توجد أي جدوى من تدريس القواعد، وهناك من يرى ضرورة تدريسها بطريقة استدلالية أو استبطانية، جلية أو ضمنية. وهناك من يرى ضرورة الجمع بينهما في أي عملية تعليمية، وهذا ما سيكشف عنه بحثنا هذا.

Grammar instruction has recently been used to refer to any focus on form in language teaching as opposed to any focus on meaning. The upsurge of interest in the teaching of grammatical forms in the eighties stems from the deep moans and groans of language teachers about the learners' falling standards in general and grammatical inaccuracy in particular. The Communicative Approach in its own abode has produced fluent but inaccurate users of language. The search for accuracy in speaking and writing seems to require a prompt return to the teaching of grammar either explicitly or implicitly.

Grammar instruction can take the form of implicit versus explicit and deductive versus inductive leaning and teaching. For the start, it must be noted that explicit learning breaks down into deductive and inductive ways. Since these dichotomies seem to be ambiguous, they require some clarification. Deduction is a method of reasoning which works from the general to the particular; i.e., from explicit formulated general rules to concrete examples or particular cases. Inductive learning provides learners with rules and information about linguistic structures and then lets learners supply examples for these rules. It has been associated in language teaching with traditional grammar, grammar-translation, and cognitive-code approaches. Induction is a method of reasoning which moves from the particular to the general; that is, from specific instances or examples to general rules. In inductive learning, learners are not taught grammatical rules, but are required to discover the rules for themselves from a range of examples. DeKeyser (1994: 188) defines these approaches as follows: *Deductive* means that the rules are given before any examples are seen; *inductive* means that rules are inferred from examples presented (first). *Implicit* means that no rules are formulated; *explicit* means rules are formulated (either by the teacher or the student, either before or after examples/practice).

Inductive teaching in its turn splits up into implicit induction and explicit induction. Once again, researchers do not fail to tackle this issue. DeKeyser (1998), for example, examines a plethora of recent overviews on the learning of artificial grammars, most of which presented in the nineties. The findings show that implicit induction is better than explicit induction. Yet, DeKeyser hastens to declare that it is not clear at all whether the learners have induced the rules or memorised the exemplars and drawn analogies upon them, and cites further studies which support the view that "subjects do not learn abstract rules implicitly but, rather, learn exemplars ... explicitly" (*ibid.* 45).

Researchers and educationalists hold varied opinions on the explicit / implicit and deductive / inductive issues. Roughly speaking, the tradition inherited from the Greek grammarians for twenty-five centuries ago is explicit-deductive teaching. This option is still commonly practised by first and second language teachers and overwhelmingly preferred by their learners though some researchers in the twentieth century seem to favour an inductive approach to the teaching and learning of grammar. As Kelly (1969: 34) points out, both deductive and inductive methods have existed for ages, but never on an equal footing. Whereas deductive learning dominated the late Middle Ages and the eighteenth century, inductive learning dominated the late renaissance and early twentieth century.

Comparative studies which sought to ascertain the effectiveness of implicit and explicit instruction in the sixties and seventies seemed to be inconclusive. This may be due to the fact that researchers at that time did not carefully consider what they were investigating. In the last two decades, especially in the nineties, researchers turned their attention to the study of specific aspects of language and found that

grammatical structures are processed differently, and thus may respond to different types of instruction. As a consequence, researchers ceased experimenting implicit and explicit approaches on whole language programmes and set out to investigate some types of rules in individual lessons.

Nowadays, this issue is still at stake: language specialists differ in their view to the deductive-inductive options. For example, in an answer to the question whether grammar should be presented inductively or deductively, Brown (1994: 351) alleges that the inductive method is in favour to date since it is in tune with the subconscious natural language acquisition and the notion of interlanguage development where learners progress according to some well-defined stages of acquisition, and that it develops a 'communicative feel' towards accuracy without overwhelming learners with too much grammatical explanation and thus builds up their motivation by allowing them to discover rules for themselves (Brown, *ibid.*). However, in spite of Brown's advocacy for inductive teaching, he does not deny that a deductive approach or a combination of the two may be also appropriate in certain situations. Spada (1997: 75) reports that some researchers (such as Chastain, 1969; Scherer and Wertheimer, 1964; Smith, 1969) have drawn some method comparison studies between inductive (e.g. Audiolingual) and deductive (e.g. Grammar-Translation) instruction, but failed to find differences in learning outcomes. The results were indeed 'inconclusive'. Nevertheless, Spada (1997) reports that some studies (such as Savignon's (1972) and Montgomery and Einstein's (1985) show great benefits for the incorporation of communicative activities in the Audio-lingual programmes.

It is worth mentioning that a great deal of the literature dealing with the different approaches of grammar instruction have considered the controversy of explicit and implicit knowledge in language

learning. These two types of knowledge have been tackled with in different ways. Most notable among those researchers who provide accurate definitions of these terms have been Bialystok (1981, 1982) and Krashen (1982, 1992) who are interested in the role of formal instruction. This interest leads them to divide linguistic knowledge into two parts: implicit and explicit. Their formulations are the most frequently discussed among researchers, and therefore need to be highlighted here.

Bialystok defines explicit and implicit knowledge as follows:

Explicit Linguistic Knowledge contains all the conscious facts the learner has about the language and the criterion for admission to this category is the ability to articulate those facts ... Implicit Linguistic Knowledge is the intuitive information upon which the language learner operates in order to produce responses (comprehension or production) in the target language. Whatever information is automatic and is used spontaneously in language tasks is represented in Implicit Linguistic Knowledge ... the content may include grammar rules, vocabulary, and so on. It is in this sense that a language learner may claim that a sentence “sounds” or “feels” right, although no direct evidence for the correctness of the sentence can be cited. (Bialystok 1981: 201)

The foregoing quotation shows that both explicit and implicit linguistic knowledge contain grammatical rules, vocabulary items and other linguistic rules. The two types of knowledge differ in the fact that explicit knowledge involves consciousness about language, but implicit knowledge involves the use of ‘intuitive information’ that guides the learner in producing grammaticality judgement without providing any rules as grammatical evidence. It is clear from Bialystok’s (1981) description of these knowledge types that explicit knowledge turns into implicit knowledge through practice.

Bialystok (1982) presents a tricomponential model for describing language proficiency where language tasks are distinguished in terms of a continuum including formal, rhetorical and instrumental aspects. According to this approach in which Bialystok wants to get rid of the difficulties of the binary 'formal-functional' classification:

When a fluent speaker uses language he draws upon three aspects of language: a *structural* aspect, which is concerned with the formal features of language, including pronunciation, grammatical rules and vocabulary; a *rhetorical* aspect, which is concerned with the development of generalised rules of spoken and written discourse; and an *instrumental* aspect, which involves the ability of the speaker to interpret or express the conceptual meaning which is appropriate to a given context.

(Bialystok, 1982: 33)

Krashen is well known for his sharp distinction between 'acquisition' and 'learning'. He regards the former as equivalent to implicit knowledge and the latter to explicit knowledge. For Krashen (1982), 'acquired' knowledge is totally subconscious, and it is similar to the way children acquire their first and second languages in natural communication where there is sufficient exposure to comprehensible input. 'Learnt' knowledge arises from the conscious study of the formal aspects of language. He further concedes that 'learnt' knowledge does not turn into 'acquired' knowledge, but serves only as a 'Monitor' for the linguistic output resulting from the 'acquired' knowledge providing the learner has enough time and is focused on form (Krashen, 1982: 83-92).

In an attempt to put grammar in its right place, Krashen (1982: 84-87) presents three main arguments against any form of grammar instruction. These can be summed up as follows: (1) acquisition often happens in cases where learning never occurs, (2) learning never turns into acquisition, and (3) even the most successful learners master only

a small portion of the rules being taught. Since the role of grammar in a foreign language is restricted to monitoring; what can be monitored is very limited. The rules anchored in the students' heads as 'mental baggage' and used in real situations are quite limited. According to Krashen (*ibid.*, pp. 92-94), the rules used in performance are the rules which are actually learned by the best students from the rules which are taught from the best teachers' knowledge. These rules are drawn from the applied linguists' knowledge which are in themselves drawn from the formal linguists' knowledge which are in turn drawn from all the rules of English. So, the rules of language are reduced to a greater extent.

Contrary to Krashen, Odlin (1986) seeks to provide a better understanding of the nature and the role of explicit knowledge. He advances a comprehensive alternative view integrating 'knowing about' with 'knowing' a new language. According to him, there are three main characteristics necessary for understanding explicit knowledge:

Knowledge is primarily a folk-taxonomic representation of functions and explicit forms in the target language.

Some explicit knowledge is accessible for discourse organization as well as for monitoring. In fact, more explicit knowledge may be used for the former than the latter.

The accessibility of forms is related not only to the grammatical detail in the forms but also to the communicative utility of being aware of such forms.

(Odlin, 1986: 140)

Odlin's conclusions suggest that explicit knowledge incorporates both forms and functions as well as discourse and monitoring. They show that forms are not only useful for accuracy but also for fluency as well.

On balance, McLaughlin (1990) has indicated that the implicit-explicit distinction remains a controversial issue since it is based on the concept of 'consciousness' which is, in its turn, regarded as an ambiguous notion. McLaughlin contends that "although the terms *conscious* and *unconscious* have a place in our pre-scientific vocabulary, they have acquired too much surplus meaning and should be abandoned in favour of clearly defined empirical concepts. Lacking an adequate theory of mind that allows us to decide that particular states or operations are 'conscious' or 'unconscious', one cannot falsify claims regarding consciousness in second language learning" (McLaughlin, 1990: 617). However, in spite of all these controversial ideas, one thing is agreed upon: learners are said to possess both an explicit and an implicit knowledge for processing grammatical information.

Terrell (1991) holds that there are two 'logical positions' for the teaching of grammar: a 'non-interventionist position' in the process of acquisition which seeks to provide comprehensible input in low anxiety situations and an 'interventionist position' which strives to speed up the rate of acquisition since the input or interaction hours in foreign language classes are quite limited. It must be stressed in passing that Terrell is a fervent proponent of the non-interventionist approach. He posits that research to date has not shown grammar instruction to be the most important factor in language acquisition, and thus suggests three different ways in which grammar instruction can affect acquisition: (1) as an 'advance organizer' to help understanding and segmenting input, (2) as a 'meaning-form focuser' to help learners identify the relationship between forms and meanings, and (3) through 'providing forms for monitoring' and allowing learners to acquire their own output (Terrell, 1991 :58). Terrell, like Krashen, claims that learners acquire languages in a natural way

through implicit grammar instruction which is automatically provided through sufficient comprehensible input in the classroom.

Along line with this stand, Winitz (1996) investigates the effects of explicit and implicit instruction on the grammaticality judgement of 139 Spanish college students. The results show that the students who received implicit grammar instruction achieved higher scores than those who followed explicit grammar instruction (*ibid.* 32). The point is that there is no general support for the non-interventionist approach and natural implicit learning among researchers, and the list of the researchers who are in favour of the interventionist approach is by no means exhaustive (cf. Rivers, 1981; Hulstijn 1984; Rutherford and Sharwood-Smith, 1985; Sorace, 1985; Rutherford, 1987; Ur, 1988; Harley, 1989, 1994; McLaughlin, 1990; Green and Hecht, 1992; Mohammed, 1993; Larsen-Freeman, 1995; Spada, 1997; Adamson, 1998; Swain, 1998; and Hulstijn and Hulstijn 2002; among others).

In spite of some discrepancies among researchers with regard to the preference of one approach to another, there appears to be a general tendency, especially among teachers and pedagogues, that explicit instruction is better than implicit instruction. Mohammed (1993: 59), for example, contends that "It is generally agreed that there is a need for the explicit teaching of grammar in foreign language learning situations as an aid to the development of linguistic development." Little (1994) examines a wide range of attitudes towards grammar learning and teaching, and advances three empirical arguments in favour of L2 explicit knowledge: It may aid the promotion of the implicit knowledge that is responsible for the spontaneous language use, it may help learners perform some communicative activities, without which the performance appears to be very difficult, and it may help them to overcome gaps in their grammatical implicit knowledge while communicating (Little 1994; in

Adamson, 1998: 180). In a similar vein, DeKeyser (1995) reviews laboratory research on second / foreign language learning, and comes to the conclusion that it “provides evidence for the effectiveness of explicit learning” (*ibid.* 384).

Larsen-Freeman (1995) goes as far as to challenge ten widespread myths in circulation about grammar, one of which is “Myth 7: Grammar is Acquired Naturally; It Doesn’t Have to Be Taught” (*ibid.*136). This is a myth *par excellence*, according to Larsen-Freeman, because on one hand, not all untutored learners acquire grammatical rules successfully; and on the other hand, the second half of the myth is not an “inevitable condition”; that is, the fact that “Grammar is Acquired Naturally” doesn’t mean that it should not be taught at all. In a more recent article, Adamson (1998) reviews the literature on grammar and modern language teaching and comes to the conclusion that researchers are agreed on the fact that the learning of explicit grammar is desirable and beneficial (*ibid.*177) and that new SLA research has overcome the past resistance to the explicit teaching of grammar (*ibid.*181). Eventually, the aforementioned viewpoints emanating from cognitive psychology seem to favour form-focused instruction in general. Specifically, second/foreign language learners are found to perform better under conditions of explicit-deductive learning than under implicit-inductive conditions at least for simple straightforward rules. My interpretation of these research works is that explicit teaching and systematic practising of a great amount of morphosyntactic points are deemed necessary for adequate language development. This focus on form does not necessarily imply a return to traditional or structural language teaching.

While the bulk of the evidence favours explicit teaching, other reliable studies indicate that different types of knowledge may combine to increase efficiency in learning and have thus criticised the

monolithic view of knowledge. The Willingham *et al.* (1989) study reveals that a combination of explicit and implicit instruction warrants more success than a single type of instruction. In a review of the literature on cognitive psychology, Carr and Curran (1994: 226) find that "Several studies have found that combining implicit and explicit learning strategies results in the fastest learning." In an elaborated review of the literature on explicit and implicit teaching and learning, Ellis (1995: 136) also concludes that "implicit and explicit modes of operation interact in interesting ways [Researchers] demonstrate that a blend of explicit instruction and implicit learning can be superior to either just explicit instruction or implicit learning alone."

The issue of implicit-explicit instruction has generated considerable debate. There is an avowed controversy underlying this issue. The problem may stem from the complexities of linguistic structures, the intertwined variables interfering in the experiment, and the intricacies of information-processing mechanisms involved in language learning.

Deduction vs. induction and explicit vs. implicit instruction was and remains a thorny issue. The examination of the literature demonstrates that there are three main approaches to the teaching of grammar: (a) explicit, (b) implicit, and (c) a combination of explicit-implicit. Yet, deep divergences still loom large. According to recent research in the field, other factors intervening in the process of learning the formal aspects of language should be taken into consideration. Indeed, Second Language Acquisition researchers have become consciously aware of the fact that the effectiveness of implicit or explicit instruction largely depends on the nature of the linguistic structures being taught, the instructional packet being applied, the types of rules being provided, and the kind of learners receiving the instruction in question.

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