



PRIORITIES FOR STRENGTHENING GRAMMATICAL KNOWLEDGE IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 20 years and more, a great deal of interest has been paid to grammar teaching in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) classes. Much of the research has been into which methods and approaches offer the learners the greatest opportunities to learn the target language. However, according to Motha, pinions on the right approach to learning a language differ as widely as the languages themselves” (Motha, 2013: 3). This helps to describe the discussion that this work covers. The aim of this work is to examine the areas of explicit versus implicit teaching and deductive and inductive teaching, with a focus on teaching grammar in EFL classes.

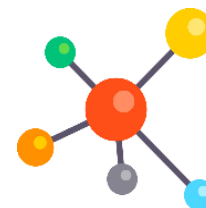
KEYWORDS

Rule, grammar, first language acquisition, second language acquisition, language teachers, explicit knowledge, Grammar Translation Method.

INTRODUCTION

The research area dealing with instructional treatments in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is

characterized by the dichotomy of two umbrella terms for the actual definition of instruction. According to



Norris and Ortega the term “explicit instruction” (2000: 437) means that “rule explanation comprised part of the instruction... or if learners were directly asked to attend to particular forms and try to arrive at metalinguistic generalizations on their own”. On the other hand, the term “implicit instruction refers to treatments without rule presentations or directions to attend to particular target forms”. The history of research in what type of instructional procedure is the most beneficial for learners of a foreign or second language (FLL) has produced different and also contradicting views. Generally speaking, the aims of instruction in second language learning/ acquisition consider the “internalization of new L2 features and processes of modification and consolidation of L2 knowledge.” (De Graaff and Housen 2009: 731). De Graaff and Housen refer to Krashen’s theory that instructional treatment will not increase or accelerate the acquisition of a second language because instruction only enhances the formation of “explicit knowledge” (2009: 732), whereas the “implicit knowledge” is not affected by any sort of instruction. Second language acquisition functions rather the same way as first language acquisition, through primary exposure to the target language (ibid.). Therefore, instruction on grammar rules does not show great effects regarding communication and language production abilities (Ellis, 2006: 85). In order to focus more deeply on the dichotomy between these two concepts of knowledge, two further terms need to be explained, that is, the terms “incidental learning: learning without intention” (Long and Robinson, 2013: 18) and “implicit learning: learning without awareness of what is being learned” (DeKeyser, 2011: 314). Implicit learning, in contrast to incidental learning, involves an underlying objective to learn information and/or a concept, but learners might learn or acquire new knowledge which is not the focus of the planned lesson.

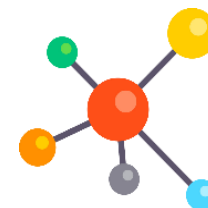
THE MAIN RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Language teachers have several opportunities to integrate a focus on form into the classroom. A purposeful focus on form can arise during communication where the teacher might decide to shift away from meaning to form or s/he could plan ahead to incorporate the form the learners will attend to in a certain lesson (ibid.: 59). While learners are communicating and practicing the language, the teacher or their interlocutors will perhaps interfere with the learners’ oral production and provide some type of feedback in order to focus on accuracy (ibid). “Immediate feedback instead of delayed feedback” is one of the core components of this theory because of the less communicative setting that learners are located if they receive some delayed feedback, because it may not be situated in a communicative context anymore (ibid.). A well- functioning and learner-centered focus on form combines the formation of both types of knowledge (i.e. explicit and implicit) as well as both types of learning (i.e. explicit and implicit), therefore numerous potential skills are practiced and the learners build more resources they can further use in communication. The advantage of using a focus on form approach, in the communicative language classroom, compared to either focusing on target forms or on meaning only is that the actual communicative function of a certain structure becomes visible to the learners (Ellis, 2002: 225). They can benefit from this shift especially while they are working on communicative tasks where some “negotiation for meaning” (Long and Robinson, 2013: 22) is involved. If teachers draw the learners’ attention to certain forms, they should give them a number of opportunities to communicate with each other (ibid.). The interlocutors serve as a resource for providing the learners with feedback about their speech (ibid.). When the interlocutor is the teacher, or another



perhaps more proficient speaker, s/he could use recasting techniques, that is, accurately stating the message the learner intended to deliver (ibid.: 23). Several other opportunities for providing feedback exist and they range from asking the students to notice any gaps between their produced speech and the speech by their interlocutor to more explicit focus on form through correcting errors using metalinguistic language (Ellis 2006: 100). Ellis identifies some potential problems which can arise when teachers aim to develop implicit knowledge among their learners through teaching that includes a focus on target forms: Learning and acquisition of a second language demand a great amount of time while learners have limited amount of opportunities for practice (2002: 224). Therefore learners' foundation of implicit knowledge from the depth of cognitive processing of a certain structure cannot be guaranteed (ibid).⁹ However, approaches that predominantly focus on meaning are characterized through the principle that "focal attention is predominantly on the communication of relevant meanings and authentic messages" (De Graaff and Housen, 2009: 735). Such teaching principles can be identified as, for example, "communicative language teaching (CLT), immersion programs or content and language integrated learning" (CLIL) (ibid.). Focus on forms involves a number of potential problems for the language learner: perhaps the presented target structures do not have any relevance, for the learners, as to why they should be learned (Long and Robinson, 2013: 16). Such models or methodologies, for example, the "Grammar Translation Method" (ibid) have not shown evidence that there is an increase of language learning (ibid.). The improvement of the learners' abilities to communicate, to interact and to express certain meaning in the target language, remains questionable when teachers apply such approaches (Motha, 2013: 6). On the other hand, approaches and methods with a

dominant focus on meaning which is connected to the above mentioned theories about implicit teaching and implicit acquisition of the second language also consist of gaps in preparing the learners to develop and produce accurate language (ibid.: 7). Long and Robinson also discuss the learners' differences in age as having an effect on their language acquisition which can result in a potential decrease of the abilities of implicit learning (2013: 19). Especially older learners are endangered of losing these skills over a certain period of time (ibid.). Younger learners show greater capabilities to implicitly learn a second language through being intensively exposed to it, but unless there is a focus on form during their time spent on acquisition, their language production will remain inaccurate (ibid.: 20). On the other hand, although adult learners can also benefit from intensive exposure, in comparison to younger learners they probably will not reach the same levels of proficiency (ibid.). Another important factor which causes difficulties of acquiring target structures through an isolated focus on meaning occurs when, for example, target structures are not present in the native language of the learner (ibid.). In most cases, the disruption when communicating is limited, but speech has enormous gaps and errors (ibid.: 21). The amount of influence of cognitive processes necessary for second language acquisition causes the need or the requirement that learners, who are willing to comprehend and further process new target structures, are somehow dependent on the teacher whose primary aim should be to facilitate these developments (ibid.: 20). In contrast to this, more traditional¹⁰ explicit approaches (i.e. "translation" [ibid.]) have not shown that the learners have reached the intended nativelike competencies, therefore meaning focused instruction serves as an alternative in second language classroom.



The Common European Framework of References (CEFR) lists several factors that indicate the language level of the learner from a range starting at A1 (i.e. “Basic User- Breakthrough” (Council of Europe, 2001: 23) until C2 (i.e. “Proficient User- Mastery”) (ibid.). Connecting the use of the comparatives with the CEFR, the following serves as an example of when second language learners should be introduced to this specific structure: “[The learners] can use simple descriptive language to make brief statements about and compare objects and possessions” (ibid.: 59). This ability is addressed when the learners have already reached A2 level, when they are still “Basic User” (ibid.: 23), at a “Waystage” level.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the lesson contains numerous elements of deductive teaching, especially following the principle of sequencing a lesson based on the PPP-model. The underlying target structure of this lesson, and the general aim that the learners can compare certain people and objects using the comparatives, is embedded in the meaningful tasks, which can be seen by analyzing the lesson’s material. The learners also receive several opportunities to work in collaboration with others. Furthermore, the lesson shows that the individual phases constantly build up on each other, aiming to scaffold the lesson in a way the learners can reach the lesson’s objective.

These approaches, as well as the more current ones, can be placed within “Communicative Language Teaching”, which also leaves space for explicit grammar teaching in second language classrooms. The aim of this paper has been to investigate the somewhat problematic und dichotomous research area into how to teach grammar efficiently, using learner-centered methods. Several theoretical approaches have been investigated in order to

discover whether foreign language learners can become more proficient in their second language by either being explicitly or implicitly instructed. This work has presented the empirical evidence of studies which have investigated this area and have, as their final conclusion, reported overall advantages for explicit over implicit instruction (Norris & Ortega, 2000: 480). Three different, but possibly equally valid, theoretical approaches of an existing interface between explicit and implicit knowledge have been discussed. The non-interface position argues that explicit and implicit knowledge are two distinct constructs and do not share any kind of relationship. The weak-interface, as has been argued, supports the transformation of explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge when certain requirements (e.g. the learners being developmentally ready) are met. According to the strong-interface, explicit knowledge becomes implicit through sufficient opportunities to practice the target language. Depending on a teacher’s preference, s/he will plan and structure the lessons more explicitly or implicitly. A more detailed insight into the discussion of whether teaching a second language should contain a focus on the language form or only on meaning has been given. In general, teaching a new language structure through only a focus on form or a focus on meaning has been theoretically rejected, since a combination of both appears to be more successful for the learners.

Teachers do best when they connect the form with meaningful contexts so that the communicative aspect is not neglected in such lessons which, for example, teach certain grammar structures. This work has also described further core elements that explicit instruction should contain, in order to increase the language learners’ proficiency. However, there remains one central problem of measuring the actual results of explicit instruction, visible in a lack of



empirical evidence to show whether or not the learners' abilities for spontaneous language production are affected through a high degree of explicitness. In order to identify when a new language structure is best taught explicitly or implicitly, several characteristics of the target structure teachers have to consider have been discussed. As shown, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible; to clearly state which language 44 structures should be taught through a greater focus on form and which can be learned in a more implicit manner.

Therefore, underlying rules of new language structures have been characterized according to their scope, reliability and frequency. Teachers are asked to consider all these three characteristics in order to identify the best way to teach the structure. An overall definition of complexity is also missing in this research area, therefore different and contradicting results in determining what should be taught in what kind of manner are present in the literature of this research area. Grammar teaching can follow the principles of deductive or inductive teaching. These two concepts serve as two opportunities for teaching grammar practically that includes aspects of the aforementioned theory. The deductive approach follows principles of the PPP-model, which is connected with a strong interface and empirical evidence of skill acquisition theory. On the other hand, empirical studies report different results as to which approach is more successful for the learners, depending on the target structure, the measurements or the time of instruction. The two sample lessons, designed for this work, have been accurate examples of how one target structure, the comparatives, can be efficiently taught in a deductive and an inductive manner. Several excerpts of the lessons have been strongly linked to the relevant theories in order to show these in a more practical light. However, possible limitations of

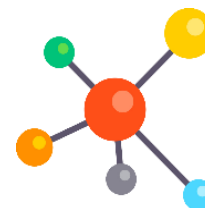
these lessons have been mentioned, for example, the difficult issue of planning and teaching an appropriate inductive lesson.

Future research into deductive or inductive teaching should aim at including both methods in, for example, a sample lesson on a certain grammar structure. This is because there have been contradicting results on the effectiveness of either approach, due to numerous different variables. Focusing on form as well as on meaning in one lesson can serve as a basis for further research in determining how grammar is learned most successfully by the learners. This area also has long-ranging practical implications for teachers (when they are aware of this research area and the different concepts involved). They would be able to design their grammar lessons in such a way that ensures that the learners benefit, as much as possible, in terms of their language learning.

Finally, future research should constantly provide lesson plans, so the readers can comprehend the individual steps undertaken in one lesson which aims to test the effectiveness of explicit/ implicit or deductive/ inductive teaching

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