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Not surprisingly, one's first language (L1) is not learned from having studied its grammatical rules. On the contrary, it is acquired as a result of exposure to a substantial amount of unmodified linguistic input from the surrounding environment. However, as cognition develops over time, the ability to process input in this manner invariably declines; thus, in order to acquire an additional language following cognitive maturation, one may need to rely upon different cognitive processes altogether (Ellis, 2008).

Nevertheless, one of the most persistent questions in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) is whether learners can emulate the processes involved in first language acquisition and acquire grammatical knowledge about a second language naturally through exposure to input that is just beyond their level of understanding (Krashen, 2008) or if learners require some explicit knowledge of grammatical rules in order to help compensate for changes in learners' cognitive abilities (Ellis, 2008). Therefore, explicit grammar instruction continues to be a contentious issue in SLA and much attention has been devoted to understanding its effectiveness in developing learners' grammatical competence and performance. The attention this issue continues to receive, despite the prevalence of explicit grammar instruction in many English for academic purposes (EAP) settings, can be attributed in part to the lingering influence of strong versions of communication-based approaches to grammar instruction, which have emphasised attention to communication with little or no attention to grammatical forms (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). On the one hand, some researchers and practitioners contend that explicit instruction of grammar, which refers to raising awareness of the grammatical rules of the language, is necessary for learners' linguistic development because it leads to learners' noticing of their own errors. Consequently, this causes learners to reconstruct their own understanding about grammatical structures (Batstone & Ellis, 2009). On the other hand, some view explicit instruction of grammar as ineffective as

students have shown to be capable of acquiring grammatical structures implicitly through repeated exposures to input, without awareness of the rules (Krashen, 2008).

Additionally, this debate is linked to several other issues in SLA, including: explicit vs. implicit knowledge, (Akakura, 2012), explicit vs. implicit feedback (Varnosfadrani & Basturkmen, 2009; Zhuo, 2010), L1 interference (Spada & Lightbrown, 1999), the order and rate of acquisition of grammatical features (Loewen et al. 2009; Sakai, 2008) and various instructional methodologies for grammar (Klapper & Rees, 2003; Nassaji, 2010; Khatib & Nikouee, 2012). In order to organize these various issues under a larger conceptual framework, this paper will provide a review of research that groups recent studies into three main categories and then sub-categorizes these studies under key terms in SLA research. The overall purpose of this paper is to argue that in light of these issues, recent studies have shown that explicit instruction in grammar is beneficial in increasing learners' grammatical competence and performance; however, there are learner variables and instructional conditions that influence the extent to which explicit grammar instruction is effective. First, the paper will present research that examines the relationship between explicit and implicit instruction, retention and types of instructional feedback. Second, the paper will analyse studies that reflect the relationship between explicit instruction and the rate and order of developmental sequences. Third, the paper will present recent studies that discuss various methodologies of grammar instruction in formal classroom settings. Finally, the paper will conclude by discussing the pedagogical implications, research gaps and potential orientations for future research on explicit grammar instruction.

Explicit vs. Implicit Grammar Instruction

Retention

One major issue relating to explicit and implicit grammar instruction is the extent to which grammatical knowledge can be retained. In Tode's (2007) study, the author investigated the effectiveness of explicit and implicit instruction on three groups of Japanese beginning-level high school learners' acquisition of the auxiliary verb "to be." Each group consisted of approximately 30 learners. In this study, the learners were exposed to the auxiliary verb "to be" in various ways. The first group received explicit instruction, the second group received implicit instruction through exposure to exemplars and the third group did not receive either explicit or implicit instruction. The results indicated that learners made significant short-term gains through explicit instruction while learners did not make any gains through implicit instruction. Moreover, learners who received implicit instruction did not outperform learners who did not receive any instruction. Additionally, the results indicated that despite learners' short term gains from explicit instruction, learners were not able to retain this knowledge, especially after the present continuous form was introduced; thus, the gains were not found to be durable. The author attributed this result to the lack of follow-up instruction and then concludes from this finding that explicit instruction of the auxiliary verb "to be" must continue while the present continuous form is introduced in order to avoid creating confusion in learners. The author also suggests exposing learners to numerous opportunities to use this auxiliary verb following extensive instruction as well as corrective feedback directed at learners' errors of this target structure. Thus, findings from this study conclude that explicit instruction can be effective but that this knowledge must continuously be reinforced through activities such as

collaborative output tasks where learners must collectively use the correct target features in order to accomplish the task appropriately (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011).

Additionally, the issue of retention of grammatical forms relates to the extent to which explicit instruction affects learners' explicit and implicit knowledge. Akakura (2012) investigated the effects of explicit instruction on 94 advanced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' implicit and explicit knowledge of English definite and indefinite articles and discovered that explicit instruction can have a positive impact on both implicit and explicit knowledge of non-salient forms on Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) activities. In this study, learners were exposed to proactive form-focused instruction of articles (where learners were exposed to the form in advance of doing activities), and they were then assessed by a separate set of tests designed to elicit both kinds of knowledge. The results showed that learners' production and recognition of articles improved significantly. Also, even though these results are limited to computer-based settings, they illustrate how learners benefit from learning at their own pace and having more autonomous control over their learning. Overall, these findings contribute to research about the benefits of explicit instruction as they demonstrate how explicit instruction can contribute to the development of both implicit and explicit knowledge in certain settings. Both of these studies regarding explicit instruction and retention indicate that retention of explicit knowledge may be dependent on the kind of instructional methodology used. This concept will be explored further in the last section of the paper.

Explicit vs. Implicit Feedback

Another issue related to the effectiveness of explicit and implicit instruction concerns the roles of explicit and implicit feedback. Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) examined the effects of explicit feedback and implicit feedback on adult Iranian EFL learners' test performance as well as the extent to which explicit and implicit feedback affects acquisition of developmentally early and developmentally late target features. To clarify the distinction between these kinds of features, an example of a developmentally early feature is the present progressive '–ing' suffix in the sentence "I am running," and an example of a developmentally late feature is the relative pronoun 'which' in the sentence "This is the church, which was built in 1816." The authors made several key discoveries as a result of this study. First, the results indicated that learners achieved significantly higher scores on items where they received explicit feedback than on items where learners received only implicit feedback. The authors attested that learners benefited more from explicit feedback because of learners' increased awareness of the correct feature, the attention directed to the "contrast with the form in their interlanguage" (p.94), the potential ambiguity of the correct form in the implicit feedback, and the metalinguistic feedback that was included in the explicit correction. Second, the results also indicated that both explicit learners attained significantly higher scores on tests of developmentally early features than on tests of developmentally late features. However, while learners benefited more from explicit feedback on developmentally early features, learners benefited more from implicit feedback on developmentally late features. The authors attributed this finding to learners' difficulty in understanding the metalinguistic descriptions included in the explicit feedback. On the whole, however, the authors conclude from these findings that explicit feedback is more effective than implicit feedback in contributing to intermediate adult learners' linguistic progress, and they advise instructors to incorporate metalinguistic explanations into their lessons.

Further support for the benefits of explicit feedback is provided by Zhuo (2010), who examined the extent to which explicit and implicit recasts positively affected 63 Chinese low proficiency elementary school learners' acquisition of the English plural noun affix '-s'. In this study, all learners were exposed to communicative, task-based instruction, but they were divided into three main groups: explicit recast group, implicit recast group and no feedback group. The results indicated that the explicit recast group outperformed both the implicit recast group and the no recast group while the implicit recast group and the no recast group achieved similar results. The author attributes this finding to the possibility that the implicit recasts were perceived to be ambiguous to the learners and, therefore, implicit recasts were as effective as no recasts. The author concludes from this study that explicit recasts are more beneficial than implicit recasts for providing negative evidence and in fostering grammatical development. Therefore, the findings from both of these studies appear to indicate that explicit grammar instruction should also involve explicit forms of feedback in order to be more beneficial to learners.

Rate and Order of Learners' Development

L1 Interference

A second major issue is whether explicit or implicit instruction can increase the rate of learners' development and whether there are any variables that may impede learners' progress through these developmental stages. Spada and Lightbrown (1999) investigated the effects of form-focused instruction (FFI) on 150 intermediate level French-Canadian children's acquisition of English interrogatives and whether the rate of grammatical acquisition can be accelerated through implicit instruction. As there are reportedly five stages of interrogative development, most of the learners in this study were at stage two. Several key findings were discovered from this study. First, the authors exposed these learners to implicit instruction of higher stages of questions (stages 4 and 5) and discovered that some learners were able to skip stage three. Thus, the authors contend that these findings are contrary to understanding of the order of acquisition. However, these findings are not strong evidence against this hypothesis because the authors also suggest that perhaps higher level stages were not acquired. Rather, learners used formulaic patterns of higher question forms which may have projected the appearance of acquisition, therefore, arguing the need for more longitudinal studies in SLA research. Another key finding is that learners were more likely to accept higher level questions that include subject-verb inversion when the subject is a pronoun but not if it is a noun. The authors attest that this rule is in accordance with the rules of French regarding inversion of the subject and the verb when the subject is a pronoun but not a noun; thus, interference from the learners' first language (L1), which is the language that learners first acquired, impeded their progress through higher level developmental stages. The authors conclude from their study that due to the failure of implicit instruction, and interference from the learners' L1, that explicit instruction that includes metalinguistic explanations is required to advance learners through developmental stages.

Incidental Learning

Another issue related to explicit instruction and the order and rate of acquisition is whether or not learners can acquire developmentally late features incidentally when their attention is diverted towards explicit instruction of another target feature. Loewen et al. (2009) investigated to what

extent the third person –s affix could be acquired incidentally as implicit and explicit knowledge by 32 intermediate level L2 learners of English in an ESL context. The authors hypothesized that through explicit instruction of the indefinite article, learners would attend to the third person –s affix incidentally. Two different tests were used to measure implicit and explicit knowledge, but neither test revealed any improvement from intensive incidental exposure to the third person –s affix. The authors attributed the results to several potential causes. First, learners were unable to attend to both the third person –s affix as well as the indefinite article simultaneously. Second, third person –s is considered to be non-salient as it does not carry any functional value. Third, the authors contend that it is possible that learners have automatically learned to be inattentive to third person – s as a result of a cognitive process called 'blocking,' which occurs "when there are two linguistic cues that realize a meaning and the more salient of these is learned, thereby overshadowing the other" (p.269). In other words, the meaning indicated by the verb "like" is more important to the learner than the grammatical information signaled by the -s affix in "likes." Thus, this study illustrates some of the difficulties apparent in incidental learning of grammar and in turn, highlights the necessity of explicit grammar instruction in formal classroom settings.

In contrast, however, there is recent research that suggests that some features can be acquired incidentally regardless of explicit grammar instruction. Sakai (2008) investigated whether explicit instruction could advance learners' rate of acquisition of grammatical features in his study on seven, adult, advanced, Japanese EFL learners' oral performance of interrogatives, negation, and word order on five communicative tasks. The author concluded that these learners produced structures "that were predicted by the theory but not by the instruction" (p.546). The results indicated that learners produced structures that were not taught in this study and the author contends that the learners would not have been exposed to instruction of these structures previously in high school. However, this study was limited by the advanced proficiency levels of the learners as all learners appeared to be around stage five or six in terms of acquisition of interrogatives. Therefore, the authors could not generalize their findings as they would require a larger sample of learners with varying proficiency levels. However, despite the finding that learners were able to acquire certain features incidentally, it does not provide strong evidence against the benefits of explicit grammar instruction, but instead suggests that perhaps there are some features which should receive extensive explicit instruction while other features should receive less attention as they may be acquired incidentally. This concept will be elaborated on further in the next study that compares different methodologies for explicit grammar instruction.

Methodologies for Explicit Grammar Instruction

Proactive vs. Reactive Focus on Form(s)

A third issue concerning the benefits of explicit grammar instruction is the differing methodologies that are available to instructors. For instance, Klapper and Rees (2003) examined the effects of two different types of explicit grammar instruction on British L2 undergraduate learners of German at a British University by comparing the effects of focus on forms (FonFs) instruction and Focus on Form (FonF) instruction. The first method involves removing forms from their context, isolating them and then presenting them to learners in advance. This planned focus on forms method focuses primarily on meaning, but explicit instruction is given to learners in advance of performing any activities. In contrast, the second method involves presenting learners with meaning-based

activities prior to any instruction of forms. This reactive focus-on-form method involves incidental learning of grammar, where instructors respond to learners' errors through implicit feedback.

Several key findings were discovered as a result of this comparison. First, the FonFs group significantly outperformed the FonF group, as it was shown that the FonF group's progress slowed and later declined. Second, there appears to be some German grammatical forms such as modals and passives that can be acquired more easily as a result of planned, explicit instruction. Third, some forms such as adjectives and pronouns are non-salient and difficult to acquire, thus more explicit instruction is required to draw attention to them. Fourth, in contrast, there are some forms such as conjunctions, prepositions and reflexives that were acquired by both groups; thus, these forms may not need extensive explicit instruction. On the whole, however, as a result of these findings, the authors conclude that planned, explicit, FonFs instruction is more effective than reactive, incidental, FonF instruction in the acquisition of particular features of German.

Consequently, Nassaji (2010) provides further support for FonF instruction that is proactive rather than reactive by presenting forms to learners in advance. In this study, the author measured the amount and effectiveness of proactive FonF and reactive FonF instruction in a communicative-based ESL classroom in a Canadian context. This study, which included 105 linguistically diverse adult L2 learners of English of varying levels of proficiency in a 54-hour, intensive English language program at a Canadian University, produced several key findings. First, the results indicated that instructors used proactive FonF instruction, which involved explicit instruction during meaning-based activities in order to have learners' attention drawn to forms more frequently. Furthermore, proactive FonF instruction was shown to be more effective on learners' progress than reactive FonF instruction, which involved less direct, more implicit forms of feedback such as recasts. As a result, this study provides further support for the contention that explicit instruction of grammar is more effective than implicit instruction in adult classroom settings.

PPP vs. PP

Furthermore, the PPP model is another methodology, which is similar in structure to the FonFs model, that instructors can employ which can help learners solidify their knowledge of grammatical forms. Khatib and Nikouee's (2012) study on two groups of 20 Iranian EFL intermediate learners at five language schools in Tehran investigated the extent to which declarative knowledge of the present perfect structure can be automatized and retained within a limited time frame. While the first group received explicit instruction that included explanation of the rule, practice through answering questions on given worksheets and additional structured communicative practice through tasks that mapped form to meaning in the mode of a Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) model, the second group received only the first two stages of instruction through the Presentation-Practice (PP) model. The results from this comparison indicated several key findings. First, the first group of participants were more successful in automatizing their knowledge of the present perfect form two days after receiving instruction. Second, the first group of participants were more successful in retaining their knowledge of the present perfect form two weeks after receiving instruction, as measured by their reaction time and error rate. The authors conclude from these findings that explicit grammar instruction that includes communicative, meaning-based tasks by means of the PPP model is more effective in automatizing proceduralized knowledge of grammatical structures than instruction that is devoid of communicative practice.

Moreover, the PPP model for explicit grammar instruction can be enhanced further if learners receive guided pre-task planning, which will assist in drawing learners' attention to the target feature and elicit more production from learners. Mochizuki and Ortega (2008) studied the effect of pre-task planning on guiding learners to attend to particular target features in task based instruction. In this study, 56 Japanese, high school EFL learners were divided into three groups, one group received pre-task guided planning instruction (the guided planning group), the second group received pre-task unguided planning instruction (the unguided planning group) and the third group did not receive any instruction regarding planning. All groups, however, were given explicit instruction on relative clauses, which is a structure that is acquired late and which the authors contend is often avoided by Japanese speakers of English, and then the learners were required to complete oral story-telling tasks by using the target feature. The results indicate that learners in the guided planning group demonstrated more attention to the form and they were also able to produce significantly longer oral narratives. The authors conclude from this study that pre-task guided planning contributes positively to learners' performance of oral communicative tasks that encourage production of target features.

Conclusion

Pedagogical Implications

As discussed, there are factors that influence the success of explicit instruction such as continued reinforcement of target features when other features are introduced (Tode, 2007), the effect of self-paced autonomous learning (Akakura, 2012), the learners' L1 (Spada & Lightbrown, 1999), the type of target feature (Klapper & Rees, 2003; Sakai, 2008) and the benefits of providing learners with extra opportunities for using the target features in communicative activities by proactive, focus on forms instruction, which may incorporate the PPP pedagogical model (Nassaji, 2010; Khatib & Nikouee, 2012; Mochizuki & Ortega, 2008). These factors must be taken into consideration when grammar is taught explicitly in the classroom.

Additionally, regarding instructional contexts, in this review, seven of the studies transpired in EFL contexts such as Japan, China and Iran while four of the studies in this review were carried out in Canada, Britain and New Zealand. However, except for the British study that involved British learners of German, which was the only language other than English that was being investigated in this review, the participants in the Canadian and New Zealand contexts were mostly from East Asian countries such as Japan, Korea and China. According to Nassaji and Fotos (2011), learners who live in or who come from EFL contexts are used to receiving explicit grammar instruction because of factors that are unique to these contexts such as expectations on the instructor to be a transmitter of information rather than a facilitator of form-to- meaning communicative activities, large class sizes, which make these kinds of activities difficult to administer, high-stake tests that require learners to understand metalinguistic terminology and the needs of students to learn English as a requirement for school rather than learning it as a tool to communicate with native speakers. Therefore, the role of context is a factor that must be considered in evaluating the efficacy of explicit grammar instruction.

Research Gaps and Future Orientations

These recent studies have indicated that there are areas where more research could be conducted in order to fill gaps in knowledge about this subject. For instance, Akakura's (2012) finding that explicit instruction can affect implicit knowledge is an important and rare discovery for two reasons. First, this finding expands upon recent research by Ellis (2005) that implicit knowledge can be measured separately from explicit knowledge. Second, this finding demonstrates that explicit instruction can benefit advanced learners whose implicit knowledge of articles is likely to have been fossilized as a result of repeated and incorrect usage. Further research into targeting learners' implicit knowledge of other target features could provide further support for confirming Akakura's claim. Another area of research that could be expanded upon further can be derived from Klapper and Rees (2003) finding that particular target features in German are more easily learned through explicit instruction. As a result of this study, further research could help to compare the effects of explicit instruction in different languages such as German with English. Additionally, the findings from this study provokes questioning which target structures benefit more from explicit instruction in order to encourage the creation of pedagogical materials and activities that can be geared towards intensive instruction of these features. Also, more research can be conducted on the effectiveness and the applicability of meaning-based activities from Focus on Form instruction in EFL contexts where class sizes are large and opportunities for communicative activities are limited. Finally, as retention is a prominent issue in this debate, more longitudinal studies are needed to determine whether the positive effects of explicit grammar instruction are retained over time.

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