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How to improve the approach to foreign language grammar teaching

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Abstract
The teaching of grammar has been one of the most controversial issues in foreign language education. The demand for superior communicative ability in the target foreign language has made confused teachers about the approach in teaching grammar for a communicative purpose: teaching grammar explicitly or implicitly. Reviewing relatively recent theoretical and empirical studies on formal explicit and implicit grammar instruction, the paper presents the need of both types of grammar instruction to promote foreign language acquisition. Considering historical backgrounds on their use by foreign language teaching methods, the recent perspectives on the use of explicit approach in a communicative context, the choice of either type of instruction is greatly determined by the educational objective, differences in the specific language feature that is being taught as well as by differences in learners’ and teachers’ characteristics, abilities and preferences. Teachers need to be eclectic in selecting the appropriate instructional strategy to address the needs of their learners and contexts.

Keywords: communicative language teaching, differences, explicit instruction, implicit instruction

1. Introduction

1.1 The aim of the study
As some researchers have noted (Richards & Renandya 2002: 145, Achard 2008: 433, Nassaji & Fotos 2011: 1), the teaching of grammar has been one of the most controversial issues in language teaching, including foreign language teaching. The most disputed questions have been about the role of grammar and the approach to grammar teaching in a foreign language classroom. It is because of the theoretical and empirical developments in language acquisition and other sciences (such as linguistics, psychology and sociolinguistics) as well, that have influenced the approach to grammar teaching (ibid., Richards 2001).
It has also been noted that there is recently an agreement among researchers, educators and teachers on the necessity to teach grammar. Grammar competence, as part of the communicative competence (Celce-Murcia 1991, Hedge 2000), needs to be developed for effective and successful communication. However the present issue is not whether grammar should be taught or not, but how to teach it effectively (Richards & Renandya 2002: 145, Ellis et al. 2009).
Referring to our teaching experience, what is often observed in a foreign language classroom is communication marked by low levels of linguistic accuracy, though learners have studied its grammar for many years. Naturally, the following questions arise: Is
explicit instruction more effective than implicit instruction? Do foreign language teachers need to use explicit instruction, implicit instruction or both to help their learners learn language for communicative purposes? Are there any factors that influence the right choice between the implicit and explicit instruction strategies in the classroom-based settings?

This study attempts to draw on explicit and implicit grammar instruction and factors that influence the right grammar instructional strategy in classroom-based settings emanating from foreign language acquisition theory and research. A broader understanding of this issue has a positive advantage for foreign language teachers in improving grammar teaching in classroom-based settings.

1.2 Methodology

Literature review was conducted following a four-stage process, including research of preliminary sources, use of secondary sources, study of primary sources and synthesis of the literature (Gall, Borg & Gall 1996: 117). Preliminary source research was conducted using the databases of Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), EBSCO and Cambridge Journals Online (from Electronic Resources for Albania, ERA2012). References within preliminary sources helped in choosing the primary material relevant to the topic, which critically studied, allowed a deeper insight in the subject.

2. Explicit and Implicit instruction

2.1 Definitions of explicit and implicit instruction

Many foreign language teachers and students find confusing and sometimes synonymous the terms dealing with the approach to grammar teaching: explicit and deductive, implicit and inductive. Referring to the definitions of explicit and implicit instruction provided in second/foreign language acquisition, a clearer and wider understanding can be provided on explicit and implicit instruction practice.

According to Thornbuy (2008) and DeKeyser (1994), deductive (approach) involves presenting a rule before the examples in which the rule is applied; inductive involves presenting examples from which a rule is inferred. According to DeKeyser (1994) and Ellis (Ellis et al. 2009)

- explicit instruction involves making learners aware of the rule deductively (by providing them with a grammatical description of the rule before examples or practice) or inductively (by helping learners to discover the rule from provided data, examples or practice). Ellis (Ellis et al. 2009), also, distinguishes reactive explicit instruction (when teachers provide metalinguistic corrective feedback on learner’ errors in the use of the target feature) from proactive (when the teacher offers a metalinguistic explanation of the target rule prior to any practice activities or when the teacher invites learners to discover the rule for themselves from data provided).

- implicit instruction involves enabling learners to learn the rule without awareness, but by providing them with experience of specific exemplars of the rule or linguistic form while they are focused on meaning. As such, implicit instruction needs creating a learning environment that is ‘enriched’ with the target feature. Implicit instruction can be reactive (where the attention to
linguistic form arises naturally) or proactive (when tasks are designed to elicit the use of a specific linguistic form, and their performance naturally creates opportunities for experiencing the target feature).

Housen and Pierrard (2006, cited in Ellis et al 2009: 18), also, describe implicit instruction as attracting a learner’s attention to the target form in the context, without making use of rule explanation; what is more, they describe it as delivered spontaneously (e.g. in a communicative activity), encouraging free use of the target form, while explicit instruction predetermines and plans teaching the target form by directing learners’ attention to it, presenting it in isolation by using rule explanation and practicing it in controlled practice activities.

Explicit and implicit instructions are not to be confused with explicit and implicit learning: implicit instruction does not always necessarily lead to implicit learning (learning that takes place without either intentionality or awareness) nor does explicit instruction leads to explicit learning (intentional conscious process) (Ellis et al 2009: 18). When the learner is not attentive to the teacher’s explanation, he may acquire a certain grammatical item implicitly in communicative activities; equally, being involved in implicit instruction, the learner “may work out what the target of the instruction is and seek to make the understanding of it explicit” (ibid.).

It is also worth noting that, according to Ellis (ibid.), explicit instruction aims at not just developing explicit knowledge (knowledge about language) but also implicit knowledge (knowledge of language). The extent of the effectiveness of explicit instruction in the acquisition of implicit and explicit knowledge is still an inconclusive issue (ibid.).

2.2 Explicit and implicit instruction from a historical perspective

Referring to different approaches and methods used in the history of foreign language didactics (Richards 2001; Larsen-Freeman 2000), implicit and explicit instruction is closely related to the educational objectives. Celce-Murcia (1991) (among other variables) considered educational objectives important in deciding the need to focus on form. “If the learner’s goal is survival communication, formal accuracy is of marginal value” (ibid.: 464); on the other hand, if the learner’s goal is accurate, meaningful, and appropriate communication, then a high degree of formal accuracy is important.

The Grammar-translation method and the Cognitive approach relied entirely on an explicit approach. Limiting the aims of studying a foreign language to making students able to know, prescribe, read and translate the written language, the Grammar-translation method approached the target language deductively through a detailed analysis of grammar rules followed by application of this knowledge to translating written language. Though learners had considerable explicit knowledge of grammar rules, they could not express their thoughts or use the language communicatively.

Similarly, the Cognitve approach of language teaching, emphasizing the cognitive skills, approached explicit grammar instruction.

The Direct method, Total Physical Response and the strong (also called deep-end, in Thornbury 2008: 22) version of the Communicative approach relied entirely on implicit
approach. Increased opportunities for communication among people created a demand for oral proficiency in foreign languages. For this reason, these methods applied implicit grammar teaching. The Direct method and the Total Physical Response encouraged natural language learning just as children pick up the grammar of their native language; without translation and grammar rules, but being immersed in language, learners would be able to induce the rules of grammar. Similarly, Community Language Learning and (de)Suggestopedia methods, assuming that learners would acquire the forms and vocabulary naturally, during the process of comprehending input, gave no formal grammar instruction. Also, the strong version of Communicative approach rejected grammar instruction claiming that language, including grammar, is acquired exclusively through communication.

Other methods as Audio Lingual Method, the Oral Approach or Situational Language Teaching and the Silent Way, largely, but not entirely, relied on implicit instruction. They were mainly organized basically on language forms and little on real life communication. For this reason, their learners could not use the implicit taught language in spontaneous speech.

Therefore, being dissatisfied with the extremes of explicit or implicit grammar instruction, there has been suggested a need for both a focus on language forms and a focus on communication (Nassaji & Fotos 2011: 12). Researchers have agreed that grammatical competence cannot be attained simply through exposure to meaningful input: without some attention to form, learners may risk ‘fossilization’ (Hinkel & Fotos 2002: 5); moreover, certain types of language knowledge (such as English articles and conditional sentences) and skills (such as academic speaking and writing) are difficult to attain in the process of naturalistic learning. In such cases, instructed learning is needed to attain high levels of language competence and performance. Therefore considerable research has followed on methods for integrating grammar instruction with communicative language learning and supporting a combination of explicit and implicit instruction. The Focus on form’ approach, drawing learners’ attention to linguistic forms in the context of meaningful communication (and reconciling the extreme explicit and implicit positions) is suggested to be effective in second/foreign language acquisition. It is basically related to the theory of noticing which claims that if learners pay attention to the form and meaning of certain language structures in the input, the internalization of the rule will be facilitated (Hinkel & Fotos 2002: 6). It is also important to note that, according to this theory, the primary nature of explicit knowledge is to develop awareness of rather than production of target forms. Such awareness is claimed to result not only from formal instruction on specific forms but also from continued communicative exposure. For this reason, grammar instruction is currently regarded as “consciousness raising” or “awareness-raising” (ibid.). In this context, Ellis (2002) has suggested some teaching activities to develop grammatical knowledge of a problematic feature. As Ellis warns, these activities are not designed to develop implicit knowledge, but simply to develop awareness of grammar, which may aid the acquisition of implicit knowledge when supplemented with other forms of input and communicative tasks.

Other researchers (Nassaji & Fotos 2011), in the context of integrating form-focused instruction in communicative context, have recommended input-and output-based instructional options, suggesting the need of both implicit and explicit form-focused instructions to promote foreign language acquisition: processing instruction, textual enhancement, discourse-based grammar teaching, interac-
focused tasks, and collaborative output tasks. Their success (except for very young learners) has been noted to be strongly dependent on the provision of output opportunities and subsequent feedback on the correctness of the output so that they can enhance their awareness and need of the correct forms (ibid: 133).

It is important for us, as teachers of foreign languages, to try their recommendations in order to give our interpretations and suggestions for improving the quality of grammar teaching.

3. Theoretical and empirical studies on explicit/implicit grammar instruction and discussions

3.1 Comparative effects of an explicit versus implicit instruction on FL learning

Many researchers have investigated if explicit or implicit instruction is more beneficial for learners. Referring to some of them, it has been acknowledged the superiority of explicit over implicit instruction. The research studies have been conducted on various aspects of instruction to foreign language learners, such as: relative pronouns and subjunctive (Scott 1990), past tense markers (Ellis, Lowen & Erlam 2006), real conditions and past simple-past continuous (Lopez, 2004), copula ‘be’ (Tode 2007), subject – verb agreement and relative clauses (Andrews 2007), phrasal verbs (Khatib & Ghannadi 2011). The 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 the classroom. But despite these results, effectiveness of explicit and implicit instruction remains an open question since:

- The conclusions drawn from these studies were limited to the acquisition of the specific grammatical elements.
- Some researchers relate and limit the positive effects of explicit instruction to some aspects considered influential in their research results. Tode (2007), in his study on the effectiveness of explicit and implicit instruction of copula ‘be’ in terms of the durability issue, concluded (after 6 months) that explicit instruction of the copula ‘be’ in EFL context had positive effects on language acquisition only in the short term memory, but not in the long term; implicit instruction was not effective either in the short term or in the long term. Andrews’ study (2007) on the effects of implicit and explicit instruction of simple (subject – verb agreement) and complex (relative clauses) grammatical structures on learning at three levels of proficiency, showed that explicit was better than implicit instruction for the complex rule and that both explicit and implicit instruction were equally effective for the simple rule.

Other researchers have emphasized the effectiveness of explicit over implicit instruction: Norris and Ortega (2000) in their meta-analytic review of 49 studies published between 1980 and 1998; Spada (1997) reviewing classroom research and laboratory studies; and Akakura (2012) investigating the acquisition of generic and non-generic article usage in English.

The advantage of explicit over implicit instruction is not definite since many studies involve treatment carried out over a relatively brief period; this advantage is questionable in the long-term (Schachter 1998, cited in Tode 2007: 12). Results of long-term studies that dealt with the issue of long-term effects of instruction of certain grammatical structures have been mixed (Tode 2007: 13-15). Klapper and Ree (2003)
studied the effectiveness of explicit and implicit instruction in the university FL learning context for four years concluding that some grammatical structures (of German as a foreign language) benefited from implicit instruction (naturalistic learning) (conjunctions, general verb forms, prepositions, reflexives, use of tenses), others from explicit instruction (adjectives, modals, passives, pronouns, relatives, word-order). Supporting the researchers, further research of this kind is needed “to determine the generalizability of these findings to other languages and teaching contexts”.

Winitz (1996) evaluated the effectiveness of implicit versus explicit instruction for the entire first semester at a university in Missouri. After a grammatically judgment test, Winitz found that learners who experienced implicit instruction (through Total Physical Response), scored significantly higher than those who were taught explicitly (though Grammar-Translation). Even this finding cannot be generalized since, as Loewen stated, “grammaticality judgment tests do not provide a direct window into L2 learners’ linguistic competence” (Ellis et al. 2009: 95).

Given the limitations of previous research, the findings in support of both types of instruction are inconsistent. The effectiveness of explicit instruction on language acquisition is and will remain a debatable issue and an object of research since valid measures of explicit and implicit knowledge are needed to be unified and well recognized. The investigation has relied on methods of measuring acquisition that favored explicit instruction (Ellis et al. 2009: 21). Referring to the above empirical studies, the positive results of the explicit groups can be due to the controlled activities used to measure the learning results which favored them: discrete-point item exercises (fill-in-the-blank exercises, multiple choice, sentence completion, open-ended question) - characteristic of the testing approach influenced by the structuralist approach to language analysis, which ‘viewed language as a set of separate parts’ (Hedge 2000: 378-379). What is more, learners were tested through predetermined written tests and highly structured production tasks; in this way the effectiveness of explicit and implicit instruction was tested only in terms of reading and writing skills. What about speaking and listening skills, and spontaneous production tests? Can they be effective ways of measuring the explicit and implicit outputs? Therefore, more studies are needed on investigating the effectiveness of both approaches of grammar instruction on free foreign language production (in written and spoken communication) and simultaneously testing to find valid measures of implicit and explicit knowledge.

### 3.2 On factors influencing the right approach to grammar instruction

Some researchers (Ellis et al. 2009, Khatib & Ghannadi 2011, LI & TIAN 2008, Nassaji & Fotos 2011, Spada & Lightbown 2008) have emphasized the benefit and need of both types of form-focused instruction (explicit and implicit) in foreign language acquisition. It is also evident, even from the definitions of explicit and implicit instruction provided in second/foreign language acquisition, that foreign language learners can benefit from both explicit and implicit instruction. Explicit instruction, drawing learners’ attention to linguistic forms and developing their metalinguistic knowledge of the target language structures, helps learners express meaning more effectively and accurately in the communicative interaction and not use continuously incorrect forms; whereas, implicit instruction enhances the communicative learning process by providing learners with
more experience of specific exemplars of a rule or linguistic form as they are focused on meaning.

Furthermore, they have concluded that the choice of a grammar teaching strategy is affected by a number of factors such as:

**Learners’ native language**: Spada and Lightbown (2008), Nassaji and Fotos (2011) support the use of explicit instruction for clarifications when the native language has strong influence on the foreign language by helping learners enhance their awareness of the target linguistic forms and learn them.

**Salience in the input**: ‘Some grammatical features are inherently more salient (easy to notice) than others’ (Ellis et al. 2009: 145) and as such, they are not acquired in the same way. For example, ‘verb-ing (more phonologically salient) is acquired before third person -s (less phonologically salient)’ (ibid.). Researchers (Akakura 2012, Ellis 1997: 80, Nassaji & Fotos 2011: 136, Spada & Lightbown 2008) claim that explicit instruction is useful with features that are not salient in the input. Clearly, directing learners’ attention to the target language form(s) through explicit instruction can assist them to notice language forms that occur frequently but are imperceptible in the input. Therefore, it is necessary to make foreign language teachers aware of the salient features of the target foreign language, so as to help them decide the right instructional strategy in their teaching practice.

The **frequency the grammatical feature** in the input is also reported to be considered important in teaching grammar (Ellis et al. 2009: 144, Burgess & Etherington 2002, Nassaji & Fotos 2011: 136). The more frequent the feature is, the more noticeable it becomes. In the case of rare grammatical forms in the input, explicit instruction, regarded as a ‘consciousness raising’ activity (Hinkel & Fotos 2002:6), can help learners both notice and enhance their awareness of a specific grammatical feature.

Another factor, also recorded in relevant studies is **rule complexity**. Some linguistic forms (such as English articles) are considered structurally simple but functionally very complex as they perform a number of different functions (Ellis 1997: 80; Ellis et al. 2009: 150) (relating to type of the noun they determine, the situational context and the discourse context). In such cases, the complex feature will require a complex explanation, using even technical metalanguage (as generic/specific reference or countable/uncountable nouns). But some authors (DeKeyser 1995, Ellis 1997, Ellis et al. 2009, Nassaji & Fotos 2011, Spada & Lightbown 2008) have assumed in their studies that implicit form-focused instruction is more suitable for complex linguistic features and rules, while explicit instruction is more effective with simple ones. Such an assumption is not supported by Andrews’s empirical study (2007) on the effects of explicit and implicit instruction on simple and complex grammatical structures for English language learners. His study resulted that explicit instruction was better than the implicit for the complex rule (relative clauses) and that both strategies were equally effective for the simple rule (subject – verb agreement). Therefore further research is needed in this aspect: approaching the right teaching strategy to the type and complexity of the target structure, so as to guide teachers in choosing the most effective one.

Researchers (Ellis 1992, 2006, LI & TIAN 2008, Nassaji & Fotos 2011, Spada & Lightbown 2008) have related the form of instruction even to the **learner developmental level**. If a learner is not developmentally ready to learn a structure as it is beyond his/her current developmental phase, he/she can hardly master the target structure. In this way, learners who have more metalinguistic knowledge and skill (even in the native language)
can be more able to notice the target language form in a communicative context than those with poorer metalinguistic ability. For this reason the first group of learner needs less explicit approach than the latter.

**Individual learning styles:** Studies in educational psychology suggest that some learners have an analytic style; they, consciously or unconsciously, learn best by formulating and testing hypotheses or rules (Celce-Murcia 1991, Celce-Murcia & Hilles: 5). While other learners have a holistic style; they learn best by experiencing, gathering, and restructuring relevant data but doing little or no apparent analysis (ibid.). Thus, considering the researchers’ suggestions (ibid., Nassaji & Fotos 2011) and the definitions of explicit and implicit instruction, it can be noted that analytic learners need more explicit instruction, while holistic learners need more implicit instruction. Therefore, as foreign language classrooms may consist of learners having different learning styles, teachers need to select the appropriate instructional strategy to address their needs. However, the above mentioned empirical research has not considered this factor in valuing the effectiveness of each grammar teaching approach (explicit/implicit) in language acquisition.

**Learners’ age** is also considered influential in the approach to grammar teaching Celce-Murcia 1991, LI & TIAN 2008, Nassaji & Fotos 2011, Spada & Lightbown 2008). It is suggested that young children, as being more holistic in their approach to learning than adults, may need little explicit grammar instruction, while older children and adults (even because of their superior cognitive ability) may learn a foreign language more effectively and quickly with the support of some explicit focus on form.

Another investigated factor related to the approach to grammar teaching is **previous language learning experience.** Research has revealed that learners who have learnt language via a traditional grammar-based approach often have preferences for continuing to learn explicitly (Celce-Murcia 1991, Spada & Lightbown 2008). Even teachers often teach grammar in the way in which they were taught (Borg 2003, cited in Spada & Lightbown 2008). Our teaching and observation practices support them.

There is little research on the direct relationship between the approach to grammar teaching and the two following factors: **learner and teacher preferences** about grammar instruction, and **teachers’ metalinguistic knowledge.** Dörnyei (2005, cited in Spada & Lightbown 2008) reported that learners benefit most from the type of instruction that suits their preferences about grammar instruction (not their teacher’s). It is also reported (Spada & Lightbown 2008) that the extent to which grammar is taught deductively depends on the level of grammar metalinguistic knowledge that the teacher has.

## 4. Conclusion

There has always been a controversy in language teaching whether grammar should be taught explicitly (through formulation of rules) or implicitly (through natural exposure to meaningful language use). Current foreign language acquisition theory and research do not support the extreme of explicit or implicit instruction. Relying largely on either of them has been deficient in language learning and using the target language accurately and fluently; explicit instruction did not help learners use the target language communicatively, whereas implicit instruction did not help learners develop certain types of language knowledge and skills. It is suggested and naturally agreed that both types of instruction can be beneficial in promoting language acquisition: explicit instruction...
increases learners’ awareness of the target language; implicit instruction, providing learners with comprehensible linguistic input, helps them develop grammatical competence in meaningful context. A range of instructional options has been recommended for integrating grammar instruction within the context of meaningful communication and reconciling the extreme explicit and implicit positions (Nassaji & Fotos 2011). Empirical research on this issue is limited; therefore further studies are needed to value the effectiveness of the instructional options that combine explicit and implicit grammar instructions.

Moreover, theory and research inform that there are many issues for teachers to consider in deciding on the right instructional strategy in teaching grammar effectively for communicative purposes: native language influence, salience and frequency of the grammatical feature in the input, rule complexity, learner developmental level, individual learning styles, learners’ age, learner and teacher preferences, teacher’s metalinguistic knowledge and previous language learning experience. More specifically, explicit instruction is recommended when the native language has strong influence on FL, the target grammatical feature is rare or not salient in the input, teaching functionally simple language forms, teaching grammar to older children and adults and learners with poor metalinguistic ability and those that have an analytic learning style, and when the level of teacher’s grammar metalinguistic knowledge is high. In other teaching contexts (salient and frequent grammatical forms in the input, functionally complex features, teaching FL to holistic, young children or learners with considerable metalinguistic knowledge, the implicit instruction strategy can be used when it suits learners’ preferences as to make them feel comfortable and motivated. But if their preference is either extremely implicit or explicit instruction the teacher’s responsibility should be to gradually accommodate the learners with the other instructional approach.

Considering all these issues, FL teachers’ decision on how to teach grammar has to be taken individually, based on their teaching situation and professional judgment. Teachers need to be eclectic, selecting the appropriate instructional strategy in order to address the needs of their learners and attempting to create the best possible conditions where accuracy and fluency of language use can be developed simultaneously and supplementary.

References


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