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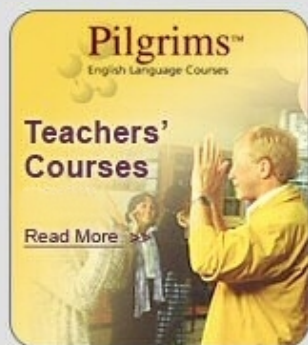


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SHORT ARTICLES

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To What Extent Should Explicit Grammar Teaching Techniques Be Applied In Order To Promote Implicit Learning?

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Abstract

Teaching grammar involves consideration of how people learn best. However, there is no unity of opinion on whether one or the other approach is absolutely 'good' or 'bad'. Some stress the

or opinion on whether one or the other approach is absolutely 'good' or 'bad'. Some stress the importance of explicit learning, while others pay a great deal of importance to implicitness of learning. In our experience, we have seen that the success of lesson depends on taking into account many different variables. Teaching grammar is no exception in this respect, sometimes requiring explicit work, some other times implicit. In this article we mention three related problems that we experienced while teaching with a predominantly implicit style and the solutions that we have found to these problems, mainly through implementing an explicit approach when required.

Introduction

Research shows that during first language acquisition, the child is not consciously engaging in the process, rather somehow acquires the mother tongue by exposure; even resists correction or explanation of any kind if the current development stage does not allow s/he to do so. Children, for instance, tend to disregard any explicit intervention in their language production; for example, they disregard the difference between what they say (e.g. I threw the ball) and the models that are offered to them (I threw the ball); yet they still acquire their native languages with remarkable speed and accuracy (Fasold, 2006). For second language learners, however, it has been hypothesized that conscious attention to linguistic form in the target language input is necessary for learning to occur (Mackey, 2006). Keeping in mind this striking difference between first and second language acquisition, the question arises of how to accomplish native-like competence- as much as possible-with adult learners whose acquisition patterns are pretty much different from those of children acquiring their native language.

One way of facilitating second language learning so that it resembles in naturalness to first language acquisition is using implicit teaching methods and techniques. Accepting that language is a natural phenomenon but not overlooking the fact that adults only learn if they consciously pay attention to what they learn (Schmidt, 2001), the implicit method of teaching aims to unit the two ends of the scale, one being naturalness and the other conscious learning. There are not many linguists and teachers who would essentially disagree with this statement: "Given that it is implicit knowledge that underlies the ability to communicate fluently and confidently in an L2, it is this type of knowledge that should be the ultimate goal of any instructional program." While stressing the logical importance of implicit knowledge in second language learning as opposed to explicit knowledge, Rod Ellis (2004) also attests to the fact that "Irrespective of whether explicit knowledge has any value in and of itself, it may assist language development by facilitating the development of implicit knowledge." Through explicit knowledge, or knowledge "about" a language or "metalinguage", learners will attend to the structure in the input and will be able to make cognitive comparisons between their language output and the input of the target language.

Review of literature

About the topic of grammar teaching and specifically about the application of implicit and explicit teaching styles, there are differing views. While Krashen (1981, 1982, 1989) argues the separation of implicit and explicit knowledge and thus does not see it probable for learners to turn explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge, the interface hypothesis, based mainly on skill-learning theory (DeKeyser, 1998), claims that explicit knowledge can be developed into implicit knowledge through communicative practice. These theories about learning have certain implications for second language teaching. If learners really could not turn what they learn explicitly into implicit, then there would be no point in teaching grammar explicitly, as language production mainly involves natural or 'automatic' use which is associated with implicit knowledge. However, there are opposing views to that. For example, Ellis (1993, 2004) argues a weak version of the interface hypothesis and suggests that explicit knowledge may be turned into implicit knowledge through appropriate activities and practice. Some other studies also suggest that learning involves attention and awareness which indicate that there is reason to integrate explicit practices in second language teaching.

The scope of the issue

As is seen in the previous section, there are differing views regarding the basic question of whether it learning occurs implicitly alone or with the help of explicit learning. This difference in opinion naturally leads to various views about how to structure teaching environment and specifically about how to teach grammar. For example, Yuan and Ellis (2003) argue that explicit knowledge improves grammatical accuracy in certain contexts. Similarly, Ellis and Gaies (1999) offer a sequence of teaching a grammar point, the English articles, as is shown below. They focus on making students aware of the topic at hand through consciousness raising activities, which involve an explicit approach. The implicit-only approach makes use of mainly real world tasks which entail implicit learning with the help of authentic materials real-life activities.

Three problems of applying solely implicit teaching and possible implementations to solve these Problems

As an English teacher, we personally favor an implicit teaching style, with focus on language production and natural communication. However, followed strictly, we have seen that it does not always prove to be flawless. Firstly, we encountered the problem of lack of awareness of the grammar point by the learners as a result of teaching solely implicitly. Often the students get lost when we try to get them to use the target grammar form. Secondly, the focus of the lesson gets fuzzy, with too much beating around the bushes but failing to capture the main point. Now and then explaining the point clearly and getting students to elaborate on the form does actually activate their schemata and prepare them for the teaching of the point. Thirdly, using certain explicit teaching techniques such as concept check questions proves really helpful, instead of the cumbersome expectation from students to notice and acquire the grammar concept after exposure to too many L2 samples, hence too much precious time spent unnecessarily. What is actually expected in this respect is to make students become more aware via discovery learning. In this paper, we will address these problems that we faced while teaching grammar almost solely with implicit style without the help of consciousness raising activities, and how we have overcome them with the explicit teaching techniques that we have integrated in our teaching subsequently.

1. Lack of awareness of the grammar point

The first problem that we were faced with before making use of more explicit techniques was students' lack of awareness of the grammar point at hand. For example, while teaching the verbs that take an infinitive and those that take a gerund, we experienced such a problem; the learners were unaware of the structure and the meaning or concept of the structure throughout the handling of the topic. In the book, there was a context provided which included gerunds and infinitives. However meaningful and helpful the context may be, the students were obviously unable to notice the grammar feature and therefore its meaning maybe because there is no distinction of gerund and infinitive in their L1. To indicate better with a concrete example; let us analyze the structure of a Turkish verb in 'Ali çay iç-me-y-i sev-er.' which can literally be translated as 'Ali tea drinking likes.' As is seen, the suffix '-me' functions as both gerund and infinitive in Turkish. As a result of this unawareness, throughout the lesson the students asked irrelevant questions about the topic, such as "Which one should I use with the verb 'do', infinitive or gerund?" This means that they overgeneralized the grammar form to all verbs and missed the point of the structure altogether. We were frustrated to explain the basics about the point all over again and again, and seemingly in vain. Later, we did some research to help us out for our next lessons. We have seen that Batstone and Ellis (2008) provide a good account of what the reason for that lack of awareness is and offer some solutions. In the article, certain principles are offered for an effective grammar teaching, one of which is the awareness principle. The principle is based on the following observation that we cited at the beginning of this article: "people learn about the things they attend to and do not learn much about the things they do not attend to" (Schmidt, 2001). The article

differentiates between different senses of awareness, two of which we find worth mentioning. Firstly, learners should pay conscious attention to certain grammatical forms that arise in the input. But this does not happen all the time. For example, the English articles 'a' and 'the' should be noticed by the learners to be learnt. However, if the interlanguage of the learners does not contain a representation of this form, then they are likely to overlook it. So, here the 'given' obstructs attention to the 'new'. To tackle this problem, Ellis and Gaies (1999) offer a sequence of activities, the first of which requires students to listen to a short text which contains exemplars of the target structure and answer a number of questions to establish a general understanding of the text. For example, in the unit focusing on the use of the English indefinite and definite articles to perform the functions of first and second mention, they ask students to listen to a text about 'a tamagochi' and answer questions like:

"What is a tamagochi?

What does an owner of a tamagochi have to do?"

The next activity is a listening cloze exercise that requires the students to listen to the same text again, this time focusing on the use of 'a' and 'the'. They are asked to complete the text as they listen:

"___ tamagochi is a computerized toy invented in Japan. The name means a cute little egg. ___ tamagochi has become very popular all around the world. The gadget hatches ___ chick. ___ chick makes a chirping sound every few minutes. ___ owner has to push buttons to feed, play with, clean up and discipline ___ chick. If ___ owner stops caring for the chick, it dies." (Ellis and Gaies, 1999)

In this way, attention is attracted to the form but not to the difference of use between 'a' and 'the' yet. Another sense of awareness differentiated from the above mentioned attention to form concerns understanding. This means that learners need to map the grammatical form they have "noticed" to particular grammatical meanings. As a way of doing that, Ellis and Gaies use concept check questions. The following questions are given as examples which can be used as concept check while teaching definite and indefinite articles:

"Answer the questions:

1. When is 'a' used? When is 'the' used?
 2. Look through the story again. Study the other phrases with 'a' and 'the' (e.g. 'a computerized toy'; 'the gadget'). Can you see why 'a' is used in some noun phrases and 'the' in others?"
- (Ellis and Gaies, 1999)

Though the connection between the form and meaning concerning the definite and the indefinite articles can be implicitly made by the learner, this kind of learning may be hindered for certain reasons for different learners, as is suggested in the explanations above. We integrated these two phases of consciousness raising activities in the other classes that we taught the same grammar point, i.e. verbs used with the infinitive and those with gerunds. We made use of a similar listening activity which featured filling in a cloze test. In the next stage of awareness, we utilized a number of concept check questions requiring students to work through the sample sentences actively to come up with an explanation for the grammar form, hence a stress on inductive grammar learning. Such an approach achieved within the lesson and helped for understanding of the point which could be seen in the practice phase of the lesson either in the long term or in the short term.\

2. Unclear focus on the grammar point

The second problem that we faced while applying a purely implicit approach to grammar teaching was the ambiguity and lack of clarity during the lesson, failing to capture the focus on the lesson. Often, we would find ourselves beating around the bushes, not getting across the main "message" of the lesson. Making use of certain explicit teaching techniques, as we believe now, may indeed facilitate learning and help students to implicitly learn language. We repeat the quotation that we made at the beginning: "Irrespective of whether explicit knowledge has any value in and of itself it may assist language development by facilitating

knowledge has any value in and of itself, it may assist language development by facilitating the development of implicit knowledge.” (Ellis, 2004). In the same article, reference is made to a principle which argues that explicit knowledge becomes implicit knowledge if learners have the opportunity for plentiful communicative practice. This is referred to as the interface hypothesis. The weak version of this hypothesis (Ellis, 1993) claims that explicit knowledge primes a number of key acquisitional processes, in particular noticing and noticing the gap; that is, through explicit learning, learners will more easily attend to the structure and make comparisons between the input and their output. An opposing view comes from Krashen (1981), who claims that explicit and implicit knowledge are entirely distinct with the result that explicit knowledge cannot be converted into implicit knowledge. This is called non-interface position. So according to this approach, there is no room for explicit techniques in grammar teaching with priority given to meaning-centered approaches such as task-based teaching. As the two far ends of the scale, the interface and the non-interface positions, seem too inflexible with the result that individual differences may be overlooked, a weak version of the interface hypothesis by Ellis seems more reasonable, providing a basis for consciousness-raising tasks that require learners to derive their own explicit grammar rules from data they are provided with, hence directed at implicit grammar but not neglecting explicit knowledge. Having adopted explicit techniques, we integrated consciousness raising activities such as contrived dialogues and texts focusing on the grammar point of the lesson. Besides, now we also make explanations on grammar points whenever it is necessary accompanied by practice which will turn the explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge.

3. Ineffective use of time

The third reason why solely implicit teaching may be less effective is the excessive time spent with many practice activities from which learners are expected to induce the grammar point. With certain grammar points, it may be a good idea to follow an explicit way of instruction rather than providing many L2 samples and activities. A simple explanation of the point in L1 may prove more helpful than providing learners with tens of sentences featuring the point and expecting that students will implicitly figure out the structure. Similarly, the findings of a study conducted by Terasa Pica; “... suggest that if the target structure is formally simple and manifests a straightforward form-function relationship (as in the case of plural –s), instruction may lead to improved accuracy. If the structure is formally simple and salient but is functionally fairly complex (as is the case with progressive –ing), instruction may help learners to learn the form but not its use so learners end up making a lot of errors. If a structure lacks saliency and is functionally very complex (as is the case with English articles) instruction has no effect at all.”

(cited in Ellis 1997) These findings show that while teaching form and meaning, instruction and explicit learning prove helpful when the structure handled is simple in terms of both form and meaning, this may not be the case for more complex structures. One conclusion we have drawn from these findings is that it is best to apply explicit techniques whenever it is both economical and efficient to suffice with explicit teaching of a point such as plurals rather than taking too much time with implicit activities. Of course, this does not mean that enough practice should not be carried out. It should and there should be other samples of L2 with the help of which learners can extend their implicit knowledge of the topic. A second conclusion to be drawn from those findings is that with formally and/or functionally complex structures, more importance should be given to practice and more opportunity should be given to students to realize and internalize the rule themselves, but of course through guided discovery activities so that the learners do not get disoriented or digress from the point of focus. Now we utilize explicit techniques and instruction more for the grammar points that we see as functionally and formally simpler. For more complex points, we prefer allocating more time for induction and implicit learning activities.

Conclusion

As we pointed out above, we have modified our teaching style in certain ways because of the problems that we encountered. While teaching grammar, we applied a strict implicit approach before. Trying to provide the students with L2 samples and expecting them to build up their

...s, trying to present the students with examples and expecting them to take up their own grammar. Though this kind of approach is useful in many ways, at times there emerges a need for explicit teaching and getting students to notice the grammar point and facilitating their implicit learning through explicit activities. In this article, we have focused on three aspects of grammar teaching where and when some application of explicit instruction is useful, drawing on different views expressed by different scholars and research in the field. The first aspect concerns learners' lack of awareness of the grammar point with the result that learners ask the basic questions again and again in the course of the lesson and therefore the lesson seems to stagnate. We cited Ellis and Batstone who provided a possible solution to this problem through noticing activities introduced before focusing on the form and function of the grammar point. The second aspect of grammar teaching that we handled above involves unclear focus on the grammar point. Here we have stressed that while teaching grammar, applying explicit teaching techniques may indeed prove helpful. We referred to the interface hypothesis which claims that explicit knowledge becomes implicit knowledge through communicative practice. Accordingly, we adopted certain consciousness raising activities such as contrived dialogues and texts which may aid learners in developing implicit knowledge of L2. Thirdly, we focused on inefficiency of solely implicit teaching in terms of time. Requiring many practice work and induction as a result, sometimes implicit teaching may be inefficient. Instead, certain explanations in L2 or L1 may benefit learners more than a great deal of implicit work. We referred to a study carried out by Terasa Pica. This study suggests that instruction may yield better results for different grammar points according to whether the point is formally and functionally simple or complex. In our teaching we now apply different amounts of explicit activity and explanation according to the formal and functional complexity of the grammar point.

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