

A Synthesis of Implicit and Explicit Learning: Teaching Approaches and Learning Strategies

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Abstract

This synthesis has been compiled from three textbooks and two online articles. It focuses on *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* edited and written by Marianne Celce-Murcia, which suggests “The Communicative Theory” is most effective for TESOL. This ideology is counterbalanced by two other texts, *The Book of Learning and Forgetting* by Frank Smith, which encourages “The Classic View” of learning or “Social Learning”, and *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* by Douglas Brown, which is concerned with “The Cognitive and Constructivist” view of learning. This manuscript attempts to explain implicit and explicit learning strategies, their relationship to Celce-Murcia’s “Nine Twentieth-Century Approaches to Language Teaching”, and objectively gauge the amount of implicit and explicit learning strategies in different learning approaches.

Introduction

SLA (Second Language Acquisition) teaching approaches are more easily applicable when instructors can pinpoint specific issues that are plaguing students’ learning and identify learning strategies to help generate better production. In order to teach SLA successfully, it is necessary to take into account the elements that make up SLA, as stated by Rebecca Oxford in Celce-Murcia (2001), multiple differences in learning strategies attribute to the students’ learning ability. Findings from neuroscience, have also demonstrated a variety of the most basic differences between students. In Richards et al. (2011), it is stated that brain research done on student writers confirmed that there are major differences between learners who are “good and bad writers”; in which case, they use their brain in different ways (p. 502). The educational stance that all students are smart, as stated in Sousa and Tomlinson (2011), suggests that differences in students are not due to a level of intelligence, but there are many different events throughout the learning cycle of an SLA learner that interfere in the educational process. One of the most complete examples is to compare the learning strategies in which an adult interprets information and approaches difficult tasks; this concept is radically different from that of a child SLA learner. Since there are so many variables, teachers need to adapt their teaching approaches to get the desired outcome in SLA (Byrnes & Fox, 1998). It is the teachers’ job to use mixed-approaches or learning approaches that require a more balanced amount of implicit and explicit learning strategies in order to cater to a larger amount of students.

The search for an all-inclusive teaching approach for SLA is a heavily sought-after entity, but the goal of creating such a theory is often viewed as unreachable in the eyes of many professionals in the field. Rebecca Oxford in Celce-Murcia (2001) articulates that, an overall flawless design cannot be established, when she stated that it is quite foolish to think that a single L2 methodology could possibly fit an entire class filled with students: who have a range of stylistic and strategic preferences. However, given the factors of students' "learning strategies"; educators can make connections to their "preferences" and use teaching approaches to suite their needs (p.359). Since this rationale is a more common belief today, it is important for educators to be knowledgeable of students' learning strategies, the relationship between implicit and explicit learning and the most beneficial teaching approaches.

To this end we ask ourselves:

- How has implicit and explicit learning been classified?
- What are implicit and explicit learning strategies?
- How are implicit and explicit strategies interrelated?
- Which teaching approaches advocate implicit and explicit learning strategies?

Background

The dualism of implicit and explicit learning has been a topic of great controversy amongst theorists and has typically been divided into two separate domains, which have been classified with different terminologies to define the dichotomies. One of the major underlining characteristics of a teaching approach is the level of implicitness or explicitness it exemplifies, thus instructors should align teaching approaches and learning strategies to aim at the cognitive style and learning preferences of their students. Students must be prepared for the education ahead of them, and in which case, educators must get a better understanding of implicit and explicit learning and the teaching approaches that employ them. With so many ways to define implicit and explicit learning, it is confusing how to make clear distinctions; however, implicit and explicit learning have been embodied in such dichotomies as: Smith's (1998) classic and official education, Brown's (2006) conscious and unconscious learning, Brown's (2006) focal and peripheral attention, and their relation to Bialystok's (1978) "Model of Second Language Learning".

Classic and Official Education Dichotomy

Smith (1998), in *The Book of Learning and Forgetting*, describes learning as "two visions" of thought and explains the different amounts of awareness that people have in an educational atmosphere (p. 5). He coined the terms, the classic view and the official theory to explain the process of education. The classic view of learning is considered to be more implicit in nature, and as described by Smith (1998), constitutes life-long learning for more complex educational tasks. In the classical view, he states that students' learning happens effortlessly and

through social interactions. According to Smith (1998), official learning is explicit learning, recognizing that for students to become aware of their knowledge, it requires hard work, and students have to memorize facts for testing. This type of explicit learning is ubiquitous within the education system today. However, he believes that testing inhibits progress and it is unpremeditated and further advocates that most of learning in life happens unconsciously while interacting with others; thus we should strive to use more implicit teaching approaches in the classroom (Smith, 1998).

Conscious and Unconscious Learning Dichotomy

Brown (2006) describes implicit learning as, absorbing knowledge without conscious effort; or not having “awareness of what has been learned” (p. 292). In retrospect, Brown (2006) explains that explicit learning uses awareness to intentionally process information. In essence, these terms are seen as two different realms distinguished only by their psychological state. Although these theories coincide with Smith’s (1998) observations, Brown (2006) believes that both types of learning included “focusing on certain stimuli” (p. 292). The difference being, explicit learners are in control of their focus and are consciously trying to learn the topic at hand, whereas implicit learners are overtaken by the stimulus and learn through experiencing the situation. Along the same lines, Krashen defines implicit learning as an unconscious acquisition, while stating that explicit learning is conscious learning (as cited in Finkbeiner, 1998). Krashen theorizes that conscious learning can only be used as a “monitor” and that all language acquisition comes from implicitly processing the information (Brown, 2006, p. 294). Controversially, many other theorists state that there are different levels of consciousness and unconsciousness required for different language acquisition tasks, and these processes have not been completely defined (Brown, 2006). What we know from research is that the most complex learning happens when we are unconscious of the process at hand (Finkbeiner, 1998) and though conscious and unconscious learning can be slippery terms (Brown, 2006), we can simply view them as differences in focal attention on stimuli.

Focal and Peripheral Attention Dichotomy

Focal and peripheral attention was another attempt of describing how implicit and explicit learning were interrelated. Previously in SLA, focal attention and peripheral attention, compared with explicit and implicit learning, were seen as being synonymous. However, Brown (2006) warns about some of the “pitfalls” when making oversimplifications, as he states it is very important to note that in virtually every act of performing something, “focal and peripheral attention actually occur simultaneously” (p. 301). In McLaughlin’s Model (1978) he agrees with Brown’s (2006) rationale. (Table 1. 1) When we learn, we cannot distinguish between implicitness and explicitness, because they vary depending on the context of the learning situation. Furthermore, implicit and explicit learning happen at the

same time due to the nature of language acquisition. The idea that there is a “monitor” or “conscious mind” that can only make adjustments or process explicit information seems merely theoretical (Brown, 2006, p. 294). Thus, in this case, Krashen’s distinctions between learning and acquisition have been seen as empirically unverifiable. It is more widely accepted that implicit and explicit learning are overlapping entities as can be seen in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Practical Applications of McLaughlin’s Attention-Processing Model
(Adapted from Brown, 2006, p. 302)

Attention	Controlled: new skill capacity limited	Automatic: well-trained practiced skill capacity is relatively unlimited
Focal Attention (Explicit Strategies)	A. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grammatical explanation of a specific point • Word definition • Copy a written model • The first stages of “memorizing” a dialog • Prefabricated patterns • Various discrete-point exercises 	B. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping an eye out for something • Advanced L2 learner focuses on modals, clause formation, etc. • Monitoring oneself while talking or writing • Scanning • Editing, peer-editing
Peripheral Attention (Implicit Strategies)	C. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple greetings • The later stages of “memorizing” a dialog • TPR/Natural Approach • New L2 learner successfully completes a brief conversation 	D. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open-ended group work • Rapid reading, skimming • Free writing • Normal conversational exchanges of some length

The Model of Interacting Knowledge

In a cognitive attempt to unify implicit and explicit learning, Bialystok (1978) created a model explaining how explicit and implicit learning coincide (Fig. 1). In Bialystok’s (1978) model, implicit and explicit learning strategies can be seen as interconnected entities that are concurrently happening in unison. According to Bialystok (1978), implicit and explicit learning strategies operate in unison to process knowledge. Through repetition, language can move from being explicitly analyzed to structures that are easily accessed, but it will never truly be internalized like implicit knowledge. However, Bialystok (1978) admits that even explicit knowledge is slowly converted into implicit knowledge as we make new cognitive associations and internalize the information. One of the central themes of Bialystok’s (1978) theory states that we must first acquire knowledge before we can possess it. Furthermore, though there are many views of how we acquire language knowledge, the learning strategies designed for input and intake are quintessential in the act of SLA. And so, understanding the teaching approaches which utilize learning strategies can define at what level students are engaged in implicit or explicit learning.

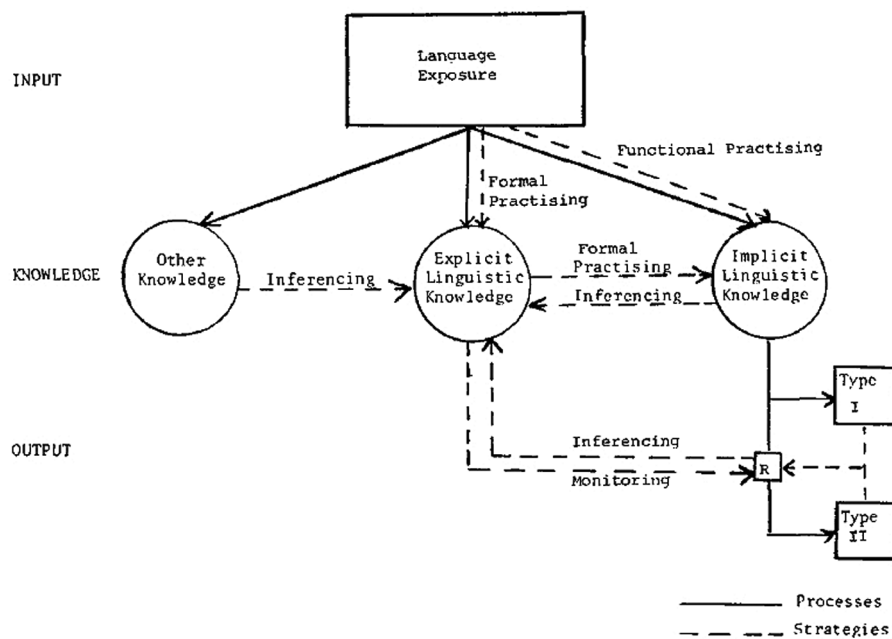


Fig. 1: Model of Interacting Knowledge (Bialystok, 1978, p. 71)
(Original Title: Model of Second Language Learning)

Learning Strategies and Teaching Approaches

Research regarding the combination and plausibility of implicit and explicit learning strategies has opened the door for more radical interpretations of SLA teaching approaches. These teaching approaches all use implicit and explicit learning strategies to drive their learning theories to some extent, but each seem to exploit different amounts of implicit and explicit learning (Brown, 2006). These different variations can be seen in Table 1.2, which summarizes the implicit and explicit learning strategies associated with Celce-Murcia's (2001) "Nine Twentieth-Century Approaches to Language Teaching" (p. 5-9) according to the social, physiological and cognitive views defined earlier in Table 1.1 and Fig. 1.

Table 1.2: Implicit vs. Explicit Strategies (Adapted from Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 5-9)

Teaching Approaches	Implicit Learning Strategies	Explicit Learning Strategies
Reading	There is little to no implicit learning. Students read text and infer the meaning of new words. Rapid reading and skimming promotes peripheral attention.	There is a high amount of explicit learning. Vocabulary is controlled and it is taught based on frequency and usefulness for reading. Grammar is also limited and only taught for reading comprehension.
Grammar-Translation	There is a small amount of implicit learning. Students read text and infer the meaning of some new words.	There is a high amount of explicit learning. Students' attention is focused on parsing grammar and reading difficult passages. They are learning in their native language and use grammar concepts to translate. There is little to no social interaction or speech.

Teaching Approaches	Implicit Learning Strategies	Explicit Learning Strategies
Oral-Situational	There is a small amount of implicit learning. A lot of the learning is done orally and the grammatical forms are practiced later. This allows the students to make some of their own inferences about language in new and different situations.	There is a high amount of explicit learning. Grammar learning is highly controlled and is presented to the learners in a natural order. Most of the speaking is geared toward the target language, so the students have to consciously develop and manipulate the phrases.
Audio-lingualism	There is an average amount of implicit learning. Dialogs and role-plays are often used to get students to interact socially. Grammar rules are learned incidentally in conversation.	There is quite a high amount of explicit learning. Mimicry and memorization is seen as a way to build correct habits. Corrections are common and emphasis is placed on proper pronunciation from the start. Learning activities are highly controlled.
Affective-Humanistic	There is an average amount of implicit learning. Teacher moves to a facilitation role, letting the students communicate about topics that are meaningful to them. Peer interaction is highly promoted.	There is an average amount of explicit learning. Students' conscious mind works on self-realization and the materials at hand.
Cognitive	There is an average amount of implicit learning. Priority is given to speaking and listening. Rules of language and pronunciation can be learned inductively, leaving much of the second-language to be learned implicitly. Learners have a chance to make their own connections.	There is an average amount of explicit learning. Vocabulary is instructed to the students and high stress is placed on rule acquisition. Grammar is usually taught deductively.
Communicative	There is a high amount of implicit learning. Most of the Communicative Learning theory is based on reflecting real-world environments and different social contexts. This enables students to inadvertently learn social functions. Students try to cooperate and produce language. Students come with different skill sets, so they can learn new grammar and words implicitly through conversation.	There is an average amount of explicit learning. The target language and the environment used are controlled with the language. It involves other tasks such as; reading, speaking, listening, and writing. This requires intention on the student to comprehend the material. Error correction is often given, but is not a primary concern.
Direct	There is a high amount of implicit learning. There is no use of the mother tongue permitted; grammar and culture are learned inductively through reading texts and conversations.	There is a small amount of explicit learning. Some repetition is required to learn vocabulary and phrases. Actions and pictures are used to make the significance of new words understandable.
Comprehension-Based	There is a high amount of implicit learning. Students are not forced to focus on rule learning or memorization. Learners listen to meaningful speech; they develop speaking skills spontaneously and subconsciously. Learners only speak when they are ready and no error correction should be given.	There is little to no explicit learning. Some rule learning is taught, but it is seen as unhelpful. Learners are given listening tasks, just above their level of comprehension, so they may have to deductively analyze tasks.

Discussion

On one end of the spectrum, as stated by Brown (2006), some theorists would attest that language should never be taught explicitly, while others would encourage a heavily implicit method of language education. Many SLA researchers have attempted to explain and rationalize the positive and negative effects of implicit and explicit learning, but the complexities embodied in SLA have proven too difficult to make generalizations (Brown, 2006). The most important aspect is being informed about teaching approaches and the varying ranges of implicit and explicit learning strategies driving them. It is prevalent that implicit and explicit processes are used at the same time, as can be seen in Fig. 1 (Bialystok, 1978). Looking at Fig. 2, we can see a representation of the teaching approaches, discussed earlier in Table 1.2, and how they are related to implicit and explicit learning strategies. Fig. 2 shows that some teaching approaches represent implicit and explicit learning strategies at more extreme levels. Rebecca Oxford states, however, in SLA it would be better to move towards a “broad instructional approach” and to offer more balanced teaching approaches with equal distributions (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p.365). Thus, Audio-Linguistic, Affective-Humanistic, Cognitive and Communicative Approaches offer the most range of flexibility for learning strategies.

Learning strategies are a predisposition that can facilitate or inhibit SLA education in terms of communication, and willingness to take risks in participation. Also, learning strategies are a set of skills that students use to tackle language tasks (Celce-Murcia, 2001). As Rebecca Oxford states, aspects such as individualistic and collectivistic “manifestations”

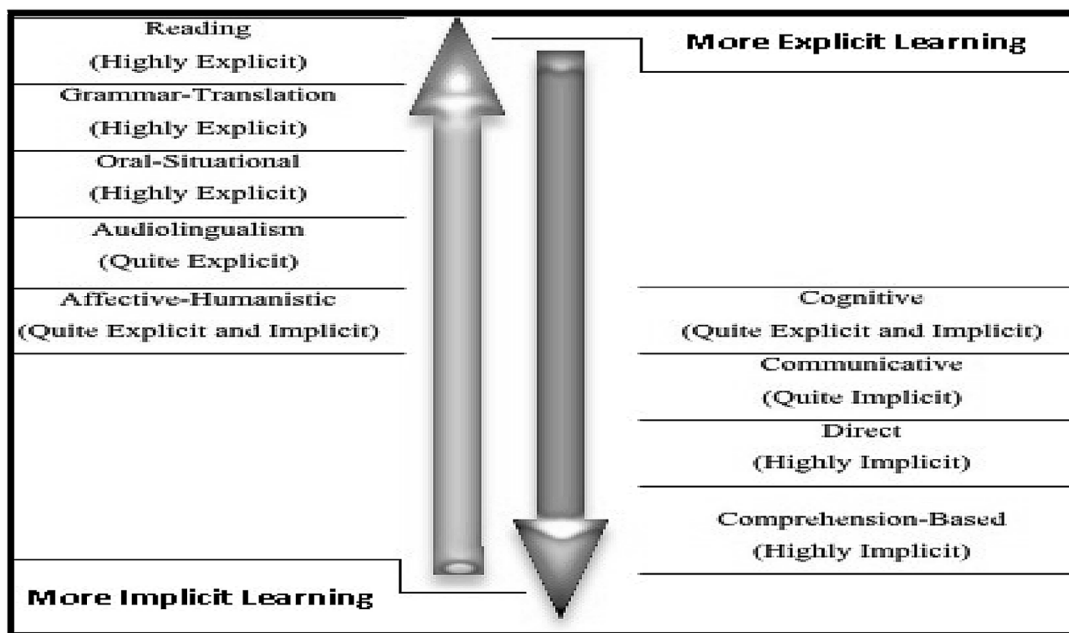


Fig. 2: Visual Explanation of Implicit vs. Explicit Learning Strategies

in students should also be taken into account when expecting certain types of interaction in class (Brown, 2006, p. 202). We cannot fit all students into the same box, as their learning strategies may range given their sociocultural identity, age and a number of other factors. These learning strategies can also “help determine how students learn a second language” (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 359), so it is vital that teachers have an overview of students’ abilities.

Educators have two different options in order to cater to their students’ learning strategies; either test the students’ learning strategies at the beginning of the year or teach new learning strategies in the classroom. Teachers can assess their students’ learning strategies at the beginning of the semester using the *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning*¹ (*SILL*), which can be found in Rebecca Oxford’s (1990) Appendix (Celce-Murcia, 2001). After giving the 50-question *SILL* test, students can estimate their own learning strategies using the *SILL Rubric*². Educators can then use the mean of the students’ learning strategies and apply the correct teaching approaches or methods to ensure the best outcome of a course. Rebecca Oxford also advocates instructors assess themselves as to be knowledgeable about their “possible biases” (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 365). Secondly, educators can use these results to see which learning strategies the students are lacking, as Rebecca Oxford (1990) found, students who were more aware of their learning strategies and adapted additional skills, did better overall in their language learning (Celce-Murcia, 2001). She also states that acquiring new learning strategies can often be achieved by “demonstrating when a given strategy might be useful” (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 363). Additionally, instructors can try to get students to transfer strategies into other skills, such as using pre-reading in pre-listening deduction (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Teaching students how to use their learning strategies in a systematic way gives them more advantages for language acquisition and more flexibility in their learning habits.

Conclusion

While many instructors are completely aware of what a school does, what teaching means, and how to create what might appear to be a lesson plan; all of these aspects are meaningless if that educator takes away learning opportunities from his or her students. If we are requiring students to learn a second language, the teacher should be required to know what the components of the teaching approaches are. Graham Crookes and Craig Chaudron would have also agreed with this point, as they advocate, “‘out-of-class’ knowledge of language teaching in areas such as needs analysis, curriculum design, lesson planning” promote successful SLA teaching (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 29). Teaching approaches that support the proper amount of implicit and explicit learning strategies are an important

1 <http://richarddpetty.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/sill-english.pdf>

2 <http://richarddpetty.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/sill-answer-sheet-english.doc>

aspect to the culmination of learning that students undergo throughout their educational careers. Crafting the correct amount of implicit and explicit learning for SLA learners should be addressed in an objective manner and the ideal balance relies on the results from their SILL test.

Students interpret information and approach difficult tasks in fundamentally distinctive ways. The application, combination and use of different teaching approaches (Fig. 2) have a number of possibilities, and the central question around which conditions are best suited for certain teaching approaches is much deeper than one would imagine (Brown, 2006). There is no simple solution or cardboard cutout that fits the needs of every student, and so in either case we should try to identify the common trends in which our students generally attain knowledge instead, as these different learning strategies govern how students will process information and how successful they will be in our courses.

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