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The effect of implicit and explicit grammar instruction on learners' achievements in receptive and productive modes

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the effects of implicit and explicit language instruction on students' ability to learn grammar and use it appropriately in their writing. To this purpose, two intact classes of 30 adult learners were chosen for teaching the targeted structure (present perfect) through different methods of instruction. The results indicated the outperformance of the participants in the explicit group over the performance of the participants in the implicit group in both productive and receptive modes. The findings support the arguments regarding the importance of metalinguistic awareness in language learning.

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Keywords: implicit instruction; explicit instructions; receptive mode; productive mode

1. Introduction

Grammar teaching is still a controversial issue in the field of second and foreign language instruction. It has been of great interest to researchers and teachers to find out how to teach grammar. Different attitudes to grammar have led to different methods. Based on the recent research there is a distinction between Focus on Forms, Focus on Form and Focus on Meaning approaches. According to Burgess and Etherington (2002), Focus on Forms adopts a structuralist approach to language and the focus is on the forms rather than the meaning. Focus on Form, in contrast, includes drawing the students' attention to grammatical forms in a communicative context. Focus on Meaning gives no attention to the forms and the focus of classroom activity is on communication of meaning only.

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Following Krashen's natural acquisition hypothesis (1981), students learn a language only through unconscious acquisition and there is no need for conscious awareness. He suggests that formal instruction only causes an increase in consciously-learned competence which, according to Krashen, can only function as a monitor. The monitor hypothesis asserts that a learner's learned system acts as a monitor to what they are producing. In other words, while only the acquired system is able to produce spontaneous speech, the learned system is used to check what is being uttered.

Some other researchers, on the other hand, emphasize the need for explicit instruction. They reject the traditional grammar teaching pedagogy though, in which students are presented with grammatical structures in a decontextualized manner. The traditional model of grammar teaching consisted of conscious presentation and manipulation of forms through drills and practice. This traditional model is not supported by the current research any more. However, this does not mean that grammar instruction is not useful. Rather it is suggested that learners should "encounter, process and use" the target forms in different ways, so that the form can become a part of their interlanguage. It has been noted that if learners receive communicative exposure to grammar points that have already been introduced explicitly, they will have a longer-lasting awareness of form and their accuracy will improve (Nassaji and Fotos, 2004, p 130). A related theory is Consciousness-raising theory according to which teachers should only aim at drawing learners' attention to important features of the target form not with the expectancy that learners should master the form immediately (Ranalli, 2001).

In recent years, the degree of implicitness and explicitness of grammar instruction has received so much attention. According to Ellis (2009), implicit instruction aims to provide learners with conditions under which they can infer the rules without awareness. The result will be internalizing the pattern without having their attention focused on it, and explicit instruction involves teaching a certain rule during the learning process and encouraging the learners to develop metalinguistic awareness of that rule. (Dekeyser, 1995, as cited in Ellis, 2009).

Many studies have been done to show which method of instruction is more effective in learning and using grammar, but there is not much agreement in this regard among the researchers yet and there have been contradictory results in this regards that call for more investigation in the field.

This study is to investigate how the two methods of instruction might affect the learners' achievement in both receptive and productive modes.

2. Problems and Hypotheses

The present study is to answer the following questions:

- 1- Is there any significant difference between the effects of implicit grammar instruction and explicit grammar instruction on learners' achievement of linguistic items in the receptive mode?
- 2- Is there any significant difference between the effects of implicit grammar instruction and explicit grammar instruction on learners' achievement of linguistic items in the productive mode?

The following hypotheses are made based on the research questions:

- 1- There is not any significant difference between the effects of implicit grammar instruction and explicit grammar instruction on learners' achievement in the receptive mode.
- 2- There is not any significant difference between the effects of implicit grammar instruction and explicit grammar instruction on learners' achievement in the productive mode.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 60 elementary female adult learners. They were intact groups of L2 learners from two classes (N=30). One class received implicit grammar instruction, and the other class received explicit grammar instruction over the targeted structure. The learners had already taken a placement test, so they were almost at the same level; However a proficiency test was given later to see whether they were homogeneous or not.

3.2 Materials

Materials used in this study included the book *Total English* (elementary level). A KET test (Key English Test) was also used to determine the participants' level of English proficiency and homogenize them.

Present perfect was the grammatical structure that students worked on. This structure was chosen because it is neither too easy nor too difficult for students to understand the rules associated with this structure. The two types of treatment, implicit and explicit grammar instruction were conducted. Two texts which contained the intended grammatical form were provided for the group with implicit instruction. And also, two topics for writing compositions were given to students. The topics required the learners to produce sentences containing the intended grammatical form. The first composition was considered as a part of the task they were supposed to do, and the second composition was for testing their ability to use the intended grammatical form in the productive mode. Moreover, a teacher-made grammar test over the targeted structure was administered to students to check their grammatical gains. The reliability of this test was calculated using the KR-20 formula, which was 0.75.

3.3 Procedure

The "comparison group design" was adopted to carry out this study and there was no control group. The following steps were completed within a 10 session period.

At first, the researcher gave the learners a KET proficiency test to homogenize them and determine their level of proficiency.

In the second step, the two groups received two different treatments. One group was exposed to explicit instruction, which included the following tasks (adapted from Macaro and Masterman, 2006): direct explanation of the rule on the part of the teacher, having students work individually or in pairs composing sentences, using the sentences in order to extract and explain the use of rules, having the learners do the related exercises taken from *Grammar in Use*, and translation. Having done related exercises, learners got to write on a topic that required them to use that particular grammar structure. Finally, the learners were provided with the direct form of feedback, that is the teacher underlined the errors and corrected them referring to the rules. The other group, however, was exposed to implicit instruction of grammar, which included the following tasks suggested by (Denny Sargent, 2009) : schema building (showing the grammar in use, not talking about it) by making examples, having students watch a related film answering the questions in such a way that they would have to use the targeted structure (in the case a student couldn't use the structure correctly, he was encouraged to produce the correct form with the help of peers) and providing a text with highlighted forms of the intended grammatical structure. Finally, students were asked to write on the same topic provided for the explicit group, but the feedback was not given directly. The researcher wrote the number of errors the learners had made using the

targeted structures. The learners were then encouraged to compare their own use of the grammar in the paragraph they wrote to its use in the bolded text in order to correct their errors (Vickers and Ene, 2006).

At the end, the students were given a teacher-made grammar test over those particular grammatical points to check their achievements.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Grammar test

To answer the first research question, we first look at Table 2, which presents the means and standard deviations of the two groups on the grammar test. The mean of the explicit group is higher than the mean of the implicit group. An independent t-test was run to see if the mean difference between the two groups is significant or not.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of test of grammar

group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
explicit	30	22.3333	3.68906	.67353
implicit	30	17.2333	3.99727	.72980

Table 2. Mean comparison of test of grammar

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.113	.738	5.135	58	.000	5.10000	.99310	3.11210	7.08790
Equal Variances not assumed			5.135	57.631	.000	5.10000	.99310	3.11183	7.08817

As displayed in Table 2, the t score 5.135 at 58 degree of freedom is significant at $p < 0.5$. Based on this result it can be concluded that the first null hypothesis which states that there is no significant difference between the effects of implicit grammar instruction and explicit grammar instruction on learners' achievement in the receptive mode is rejected.

4.2. Writing test

To answer the second research question, we first look at Table 4, which presents the means and standard deviations of the two groups on the test of writing. The mean of the explicit group is higher than the implicit group. A t-test was run to confirm the result.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of test of Writing

group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
explicit	30	17.6333	1.67091	.30507
implicit	30	14.2333	2.29968	.41986

Table 4. Mean comparison of the groups on the test of writing

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.604	.210	6.551	58	.000	3.40000	.51899	2.36113	4.43887
Equal variances not assumed			6.551	52.946	.000	3.40000	.51899	2.35902	4.44098

As can be seen in Table 4, the t score 6.551 at 58 degree of freedom is significant at $p < 0.05$. So it can be concluded that the second null hypothesis which states that there is no significant difference between the effects of implicit grammar instruction and explicit grammar instruction on learners' achievement in the productive mode is rejected.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Regarding the questions posed in this study, the result showed that for the chosen grammar point, students who were taught under the explicit conditions generally outperformed those who had been exposed to implicit presentation of the grammar structure. They proved to be more precise in detecting and correcting ungrammatical sentences.

There might be several reasons for the students' superior performance in the explicit group. The students who took part in this study were all adult learners who were accustomed to traditional methods of education in Iran. The major teaching strategy in Iranian schools, in case of English grammar in particular, is explicit teaching strategy. Therefore, learners' expectations could be met through direct explanation of rules.

Another reason that can explain the better performance of the explicit group is the test itself. The test contained three parts: a multiple-choice grammar part, a contextualized grammar test, and sentence making. The contextualized grammar test and sentence making are essentially tests of production and require the learners to organize their information first and then retrieve the rules. Since students in the implicit group were never given the opportunity to organize their information under grammatical headings such as "present perfect" or "simple past", they might have had difficulty in producing the right forms and tenses. Because, recovering words for blank spaces need conscious attention to grammatical

structures. The result suggests that when students concentrate on the content and do not pay attention to form of a message, they are less likely to learn specific grammar structures.

According to the writing results, also, again the explicit method seemed to be not only a familiar methodology for students, but also a way of organizing and reviewing the material they had already learnt. This monitoring of production could have been resulted from bringing back the knowledge gained under selective attention and applying a specific rule.

There are some studies such as Scott (1989, 1990), Larry M. Lynch (2005), and Andrews (2007) that approve the results of the present study.

In general, the results of most studies point to the notion that explicit teaching strategy has a better effect on the improving of L2 grammar of learners of English as a foreign language. However, as mentioned before, the type of the test could have an effect on learners' performance as the contextualized part of the grammar test and the writing test were tests of production that required the learners to refer to the rules they had learned and organized in their brain. The grammatical structure chosen for this study (present perfect) might have also been effective in determining the result of this study. As Andrews (2007) showed in his study, a simpler grammatical structure could lead to a completely different result.

Apart from all the criticisms, the general result of the studies so far, have confirmed the fact that explicit teaching strategy has a better effect on improving the EFL learners' L2 grammar. However, more research is required to come to the point of certainty.

Given the results of the current research, teachers can help learners to do their best and this requires the teachers to provide the learners with form-focused instruction and explicit feedback on errors. It is worthy to draw the learners' attention to the rules explicitly. This study confirms Lightbown's (1998 as cited in Naeini, 2008) emphasis on the beneficial results of stopping the communicative activity in a class for a few seconds and making the focus on form quite explicitly and drawing the learners' attention on forms not meaning in this situation. It can be suggested that noticing the mismatch between learner utterances and target utterances can help the learners with the acquisition of grammar points.

Generally speaking, when learners are informed of the grammatical rules, they feel more comfortable, self-confident and motivated in the classroom. Thus, it would be wise for educators, material developers and course book designers to pay attention to this fact and take cautious measures in planning grammar teaching strategies.

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