The Role of Explicit Grammar in Language Teaching

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The debate on grammar in second language acquisition: past, present, and future, is a well written summary of both explicit and implicit grammar instruction in second language acquisition from past to present and with future projections. The thesis holds that explicit grammar instruction plays a very important role in foreign language learning and teaching and argues that English education in China should lay emphasis on how to assist students' grammar internalization and promote the conversion from explicit learning to implicit learning.

Keyword: explicit grammar, language teaching, grammar

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to explain the role of explicit grammar instruction in college English learning with regarding to its effect on Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students' learning. The conclusion sums up with the point that the explicit grammar should not be confined to the extreme form of total induction or total deduction. EFL teachers should make a rational combination of explicit and implicit instruction.

Implicit Learning

Definition of Implicit Learning

Defining implicit learning is a difficult task, mostly because it is a concept that revolves around multiple criteria. Implicit learning is composed of two kinds of learning: One is formulaic learning, and the other is rule-based learning. The former consists of "ready-made chunks of languages", i.e., expressions which are learnt as unanalyzable wholes and employed on particular occasions, such as "I do not know" and "May I have...?". The rule-based implicit learning consists of "generalized and abstract structures which have been internalized" (Ellis, 1997, p. 340). Both kinds of the learning are intuitive and largely hidden. Although learners are not conscious of what they know, they can use the knowledge freely in actual performance.

Characteristics of Implicit Learning

One of the most intriguing aspects of implicit learning is that one can learn to respond appropriately to complex relations in the task environment without conscious efforts to discover the underlying rules or structure of the task. For example, several implicit learning studies have demonstrated that attempting to figure out the rules of a grammar does not facilitate subsequent discrimination of valid from invalid strings compared with simply attempting to memorize the strings (Brumfit, 1971). Moreover, implicit learning is thought to be an alternate mode of learning that is automatic, nonconscious, and more powerful than explicit thinking for

discovering nonsalient covariance between task variables. We argue that implicit learning and the resulting knowledge are distinguished from explicit learning and knowledge by the following characteristics:

- (1) Manifest in naturally occurring language behavior and cannot be easily accessed separately from this behavior;
- (2) Easily accessible;
- (3) Unanalyzed (i.e., memory-based rather than rule-based);
- (4) Both abstract and structured;
- (5) Can be consciously analyzed.

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Explicit Grammar Instruction and Grammatical Competence

Krashen (1981) has claimed that learning that results from conscious awareness of the form of input is inferior to the implicit learning that occurs in the absence of such awareness (p. 58). They claim this is particularly evident where the stimulus domain is complex. Krashen claims instruction can be effective where the rules to be learned are easy. Reber has argued that learners will not display implicating learning, where the stimulus domain is simple and the relevant structural attributes of rules are salient, because simplicity and salience will cause them to adopt a conscious rule research strategy. However, where the rules to be learned are complex, learners in the unconsciously implicit and incidental learning conditions should outperform those in the explicitly instructed and rule search conditions.

This paper does not support Krashen's claim that unconscious acquisition produces superior learning relative to conscious learning in the explicitly instructed condition. Training in the implicit instruction does not lead to superior learning of the complex rule relative to training in explicit way. The experimental participants have a higher mean accuracy on the grammar testing. According to the research as the author has made, the mean on the grammar testing from the experimental class is significantly larger than that of control class. It supports that the Explicit Grammar Instruction (EGI) has an effective and positive influence for the subjects in experimental class. From the result, the experimental class outperforms the comparison class in grammar testing. It is safely concluded that EGI in college English does enhance the subjects' proficiency of grammar.

Effects of Explicit Grammar Instruction on English Writing Ability

Results show that the students who received explicit grammar instruction outperformed those who were instructed using the focus-on-meaning approach. In this study, the learners in explicit grammar instruction-oriented class, as in Karavas-Doukas (1996) study, not only produced meaningful content in their writing but also transferred linguistic knowledge to language use. In Melendez's study, learners in the two grammar groups (explicit versus implicit) were more able to get meaning across orally and use reflexive verbs correctly in the oral task than the control group. In the present study, subjects in experimental class were significantly better in getting meaning across and applying some grammatical rules in the writing task than those in control class. It suggested that explicit grammar instruction helped process input and developed grammatical competence so that the learners in the experimental class were able to use the linguistic knowledge for written communication. Grammar instruction in the present study may have enhanced not only the learners' grammatical competence, i.e., the ability to recognize a rule and use it, but also their ability to communicate with it in writing.

This increased competence may interact with other components and lead to a corresponding increase in overall communicative competence. Besides, grammatical knowledge learned in the classroom enhances learners' grammatical competence and can be transferred for language use in communicative expression.

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Transference of Knowledge About Grammar Into Use in Communication

Some students find it difficult to transfer their grammatical knowledge into communicative language use. To this, most teachers recognize this process as a problem for many of their students. Teachers' understanding of this gap in students' grammatical ability is perhaps not surprising for anyone who has taught at this level. Most teachers are able to relate many examples of students who can recite grammatical rules perfectly, but have difficulty putting them into practice. It would be interesting to discover if teachers who recognize these shortcomings in their students are more likely to use an integrated approach to grammar as a way of combating such problems.

The Use of Grammatical Terminology

The use of grammatical terminology in the classroom could be understood as a necessary part of an explicit approach to grammar teaching: When teachers and students talk about grammar, they need terminology. Indeed, metalinguistic discussion is seen by Krahen (1979) as one of the characteristics of explicit language teaching. A lot of teachers believe their students see grammatical terminology as useful. Similarly, there is some feeling that its use does not present a particular difficulty for students. This seems to link to students' preferences for explicit grammar teaching. It may also be related to students' previous language learning experiences; if these are based in the grammar-translation method, students will feel at home with this use of terminology.

Problem-Solving Approach

Problem-solving approaches to grammar are often used at this level. These frequently take the form of inductive techniques which challenge learners to find form-function matches for themselves. Many other consciousness-raising techniques use similar problem-solving approaches. The use of problem-solving techniques in consciousness raising tasks is seen as one of the characteristics of explicit grammar instruction. Most teachers generally feel that problem-solving approaches at this level do not produce frustration in the learners. These answers can be seen to link to responses concerning real-life tasks as practice of language. One possible interpretation is that teachers feel that students have a preference for the use of language to perform a well-defined task, rather than work without a practical end.

Indeed, English learners appear to be particularly suited to a problem-solving approach, since they tend to be relatively sophisticated, intelligent, and experienced learners.

The Role of Practice

When asked to comment on statements concerning both the role of practice and the types of practice which might prove more beneficial for learners, most teachers believe that practice of structures is important for learning grammar and improving grammatical accuracy. The important issue here concerns the type of practice used. The recognized problems with the P-P-P model mean that these teachers' perception of the phrase "productive practice" is crucial to understanding results here. Do they mean production of the P-P-P kind or

productive practice within a true communicative context? The phrase “practice of structures” within both statements could suggest an “analytical” approach to the learning of grammar, building up information about individual grammatical structures into an eventual knowledge of language as a whole.

Besides, those teachers also believe that a good knowledge of English language grammar is vital to students’ educational goal. A teacher mentioned that the majority of students wanted to get high score on any kinds of English exams. Students who were in graduate programs said that they needed to use grammar skills when they were writing research projects. They realized that they were expected to demonstrate a good knowledge of English language skills in their writing. This view seemed to resonate in the students comments. Failure to demonstrate a high standard of proficiency in English language in their writings may affect their academic performances.

It can be argued that explicit grammar instruction has only emerged fairly recently within the research and methodological literature and thus it is interesting to speculate about the origins of this group of teachers’ preferences. Are they the result of an influence of research on practice, or do they stem from teachers’ personal intuitions about what works best in their classrooms? Without a much more-in-depth study, it is difficult to determine the factors which influence teachers’ thinking of this area. However, reference to students’ characteristics, needs, and wishes in several answers indicates that teachers’ classroom actions are not determined by theoretical beliefs alone, but that student reaction to different approaches is taken into account.

Conclusion

By means of quantitative and qualitative research, the writer tries to explore the situation of the employment of explicit grammar instruction among college students. Results paint a picture of the effects of different approaches to grammar teaching which may be encouraging to those who advocate on a focus-on-form approach. The findings of the present study suggest that explicit grammar instruction plays an important role in promoting learners’ language performance.

Explicit grammar instruction can promote the learners’ noticing of linguistic forms contained in the input. Learners’ noticing of linguistic problems drives them to seek any linguistic solutions to their problems. The contexts in college English demand high levels of grammatical understanding and communicative effectiveness from learners and thus are areas in which explicit grammar instruction would appear to be particularly appropriate. Student preferences for grammar work may not accord with a Focus on Form Approach but teachers may be able to utilize.

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