

Grammar Teaching for Language Learning

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Comment peut-on enseigner la grammaire de façon à ce que les apprenants soient capables d'utiliser ce qu'ils ont appris dans la communication spontanée? Pour répondre à cette question, il faut comprendre la différence entre connaissances implicites et explicites de la grammaire. Les connaissances implicites peuvent être utilisées de façon automatique, alors que les connaissances explicites nécessitent un traitement contrôlé. Si les connaissances explicites peuvent être enseignées de façon directe, les connaissances implicites ne peuvent être apprises que de façon incidente, de par un engagement dans la communication. Le but principal de l'enseignement de la grammaire devrait être de faciliter le développement des connaissances implicites des apprenants. Cependant, l'enseignement des connaissances explicites a également son importance, puisque les apprenants peuvent les utiliser pour assurer la correction de leur production; de plus, elles facilitent l'apprentissage incident de connaissances implicites. Deux approches de l'enseignement de la grammaire sont abordées. L'une vise à aider les apprenants à découvrir par eux-mêmes des règles de grammaire explicites en réalisant des tâches favorisant la prise de conscience. L'autre vise à faciliter l'acquisition de connaissances implicites par le recours à des tâches communicatives élaborées de façon à pousser les apprenants à utiliser certaines structures grammaticales.



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Introduction

For most teachers the aim of a grammar lesson is to enable their students to use the grammatical feature that is the target of a lesson accurately and fluently in communication. However, the full acquisition of a grammatical structure is known to be a slow and gradual process involving weeks and sometimes months. During this process learners pass through a series of transitional stages before finally arriving at a stage where they are able to produce the target structure accurately in communication. For this reason it is doubtful whether a single grammar lesson – or even a series of grammar lessons – will succeed in achieving this aim in many cases. Thus, there is a mismatch between the generally accepted pedagogical aim of the grammar lesson and what is achievable in terms of acquisition. This, to my

mind, is the fundamental issue that needs to be addressed in any discussion of grammar teaching. There are perhaps two principled ways in which the teaching of grammar can take account of how learners acquire grammar. The first is to abandon the aim of teaching grammar for immediate communicative use and replace it with a lesser aim – helping learners to develop metalinguistic understanding of grammatical structures (i.e. explicit knowledge of rules). Such an aim has merit if it can be argued that such knowledge will assist the long-term process of developing the procedural knowledge (i.e. implicit knowledge) that is needed for effective communication. Below I will advance such an argument. The second way is to embed the teaching of grammar into a task-based approach where attention to grammatical form arises naturally out of the attempt to engage in meaning-focused communication. This approach caters to incidental rather than intentional language learning by students and, while it might not ensure that they achieve immediate implicit knowledge of the target form, it can help them progress towards it. I will argue that this approach also has merit.

Implicit and explicit knowledge

The distinction between implicit and explicit knowledge lies at the heart of what I want to say about grammar teaching. I will start, therefore, by briefly explaining how these two types of knowledge differ. Table 1 summarizes the key differences. It should be clear that implicit knowledge is fundamental. Effective use of a second language (L2) for communicative purposes requires access to implicit knowledge. However, explicit knowledge is also of value for those types of language use that do not require “online processing”. For example, learners can make use of explicit knowledge of the 3rd person-s rule (e.g. *he*

travels) to help them edit errors they make in the use of this structure when writing and, to a lesser extent, when speaking. Arguably, then, learners need both types of knowledge. However, implicit knowledge is primary. Implicit knowledge is not teachable; it is only learnable. According to connectionist theories of language implicit knowledge does not consist of rules but is housed in a complex neural network of associations among phrases, chunks, words and bits of words, which is built up gradually through what N. Ellis (1996) has called “sequence learning”. This is largely a subconscious process. Grammar emerges slowly as the associative network is built up through exposure to and usage of the language when learners detect underlying patterns in the countless associations they have internalized. Clearly, from this perspective, you cannot take a grammatical structure like 3rd person-s and teach it so that it immediately enters learners’ implicit knowledge. Learners have to bootstrap their way to implicit knowledge of “rules” such as 3rd person-s by extracting them from the associations they have formed. In contrast, explicit knowledge of grammatical rules is

teachable – in much the same way as declarative facts in any school subject (e.g. mathematical formulae) can be taught. This is probably why explicit grammar teaching has continued to hold sway in foreign language curricula for so long – it accords with how knowledge in other subject areas is taught. Thus, while we can **teach** students explicit knowledge of grammar we can only **facilitate** the process of acquiring implicit knowledge.

Teaching explicit knowledge

In a series of publications (e.g. R. Ellis, 1988; 1993) I have used the term **Consciousness-raising Instruction** to refer to instruction designed to help learners learn explicit rules of grammar. This type of instruction differs from many other types in that it does not include any practice activities. The aim is simply to help learners construct an explicit representation of a grammatical feature. CR instruction can be of the direct or indirect kind. In the former, students are given the rule – either by the teacher explaining it or by referring them to a grammar reference book. In the latter, students are guided to discovering grammatical rules for themselves. It is the indirect approach I want to advocate.

Indirect CR involves the use of CR tasks. A CR task is a pedagogic activity where the learners are (1) provided with L2 data related to a grammatical feature, (2) perform some operation on the data in order (3) to arrive at an explicit understanding of the grammatical rule. Table 2 (on the next page) provides an example of a CR task designed to help students work out why some double object verbs like *give* allow two patterns (e.g. *She gave me the book.*; *She gave the book to me.*) while other verbs like *explain* only allow one pattern (e.g. *She explained the problem to me.*; **She explained me the problem.*). Readers might like to work through this task to see if they can come up with a rule to explain this phenomenon.

Direct and indirect CR have both been found to be effective for teaching explicit knowledge but I want to argue that the indirect approach involving CR tasks has more to recommend it for a number of reasons. First, it involves learners in actively discovering and building their own explicit grammar of the L2 and, for many learners, this may be more motivating than just being told the rules. Second, indirect

Table 1: Implicit and explicit knowledge (from Ellis, 2015)

Characteristics	Implicit knowledge	Explicit knowledge
Consciousness	We are not conscious of what we know implicitly; implicit knowledge is only evident in communicative language behaviour.	We have conscious knowledge about the ‘facts’ of language (e.g. the meanings of words and grammatical rules)
Accessibility	Implicit knowledge can be accessed effortlessly and rapidly; it is available for automatic processing.	Explicit knowledge requires controlled processing and thus can typically only be accessed slowly and applied with difficulty.
Verbalization	Implicit knowledge cannot be verbalized unless it is made explicit; learners cannot tell what they know implicitly.	Explicit knowledge is often verbalizable; learners can report what they know. This calls for knowledge of the meta-language needed to talk about language.
Orientation	Implicit knowledge is called upon when learners are oriented towards encoding or decoding the meaning of messages in communication.	Explicit knowledge is called upon when learners are formulating and monitoring sentences to ensure they conform to target language norms or because they lack implicit knowledge.

Table 2: Example of a CR task

<p>A. What is the difference between verbs like <i>give</i> and <i>explain</i>?</p> <p>She gave a book to her father (=grammatical)</p> <p>She gave her father a book (=grammatical)</p> <p>The policeman explained the law to Mary (=grammatical)</p> <p>The policeman explained Mary the law (=ungrammatical).</p> <p>B. Indicate whether the following sentences are grammatical or ungrammatical.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. They saved Mark a seat. 2. His father read Kim a story. 3. She donated the hospital some money. 4. They suggested Mary a trip on the river. 5. They reported the police the accident. 6. They threw Mary a party. 7. The bank lent Mr. Thatcher some money. 8. He indicated Mary the right turning. 9. The festival generated the college a lot of money. 10. He cooked his girlfriend a cake. <p>C. List the verbs in B that are like <i>give</i> (i.e. permit both sentence patterns) and those that are like <i>explain</i> (i.e. allow only one sentence pattern).</p> <p>D. What is the difference between the verbs in your two lists?</p>

CR serves a learner-training function. That is, it helps learners develop the strategies that they need to work out the grammar for themselves. It is also possible that it will also improve their language analytical ability – one of the central components of language aptitude so important for successful learning. Third, a number of studies (e.g. Fotos, 1994; Eckerth, 2008) that have investigated indirect CR have found that it is as effective – and in some cases more effective – than direct CR. Fourth, when CR tasks are performed in pairs or small groups, grammar becomes a topic to talk about and thus the tasks double up as communicative tasks – providing of course that the talk they generate takes place in the L2.

The aim of CR tasks is solely to guide the development of students' explicit knowledge of grammar. There is no pretence, however, that such tasks will result in acquisition of implicit L2 knowledge. But if the tasks are performed through the medium of the L2 it is possible that they will assist in the usage-based development of implicit knowledge in general as learners interact among themselves or with the teacher. One might ask what the use is of just teaching explicit knowledge. I have already pointed out one important use – in monitoring output when conditions allow for this. Armed with the explicit knowledge that verbs like 'explain' do not alternate in the same way as

verbs like *give*, the learner is in a position to self-correct when writing a sentence such as **The policeman explained me the law*. Explicit knowledge is also of value in another way. It is now clear that the processes involved in the acquisition of implicit knowledge involve conscious attention to linguistic form (what Schmidt (2001) called "noticing"). N. Ellis (2005: 340) talks about the "collaborative mind" whereby the implicit and explicit processing systems are "dynamically involved together in every cognitive task and in every learning episode". Thus, while teachers may not be able to direct the way the collaborative mind works, they can assist it by helping learners with the explicit knowledge of grammatical features that can enhance the "noticing" of linguistic forms that is so important for implicit language learning. In particular, explicit knowledge may be needed to help learners acquire those grammatical features (such as 3rd person-s or the use of verbs like *explain*) that are resistant to implicit learning.

Facilitating implicit knowledge

Consciousness-raising instruction is a type of explicit instruction. That is, it **directs** attention to grammatical form and caters to **intentional learning** of a pre-determined grammatical structure. In contrast, implicit grammar instruction **attracts** rather than directs attention to form and caters to the **incidental acquisition** of grammatical structures while learners are primarily focused on meaning. Thus, learners are not told what the grammatical target of the instruction is but instead, through various means, have their attention drawn to it while they are engaged in acts of communication. Implicit grammar instruction has as its goal the development of the procedural ability to deploy grammatical features in communication – in other words, implicit knowledge.

However, as I noted earlier, the acquisition of implicit knowledge is a slow process. It requires massive exposure to the target language. Thus, a single implicit grammar lesson is no more likely to result in target-like implicit grammatical knowledge than a single explicit grammar lesson. Nevertheless, by creating the right conditions, implicit grammar instruction can facilitate the

ongoing development of implicit knowledge. It can push learners forward by consolidating partially acquired knowledge and by instigating the initial acquisition of new grammatical forms. Its purpose is to contribute to the usage-based development of implicit knowledge which must then continue to grow organically through further experiences with the language.

The conditions that implicit grammar instruction seeks to create are as follows:

1. Frequent exposure to the target structure and/or frequent opportunities for learners to attempt production of the target structure.
2. The creation of “real operating conditions”. That is, exposure to and use of the target structure need to occur in a context where the learner is engaged in trying to communicate in order to achieve some outcome other than that of learning the target structure.

3. A periodic focus on the target grammatical form while communication is taking place.

The principal means for achieving this is task-based language teaching (TBLT). In TBLT learners are asked to perform various types of tasks which create contexts for the interactionally authentic use of language.

A “task” is an instructional activity that satisfies four criteria (R. Ellis, 2003): (1) it requires a primary focus on meaning, (2) there is some kind of gap (e.g. an information gap that motivates the learners to communicate), (3) learners use their own linguistic resources (i.e. they are not provided with the language needed to perform the task, and (4) there is a communicative outcome (i.e. not just the display of correct language). Learners’ attention to form can be motivated either by the way the task is designed (e.g. a task

that involves reporting an accident will provide a natural context for the use of the past tense) or by the way the task is implemented (e.g. by means of corrective feedback).

Tasks can be unfocused or focused. Where tasks are intended to facilitate the acquisition of grammar they will need to be focused – that is, they are designed to induce attention to and use of a specific grammatical feature. Such tasks often figure in explicit instruction involving presentation-practice-production (PPP) where they provide a means for the intentional practice of a grammatical feature that has been previously explained to the students. However, in implicit grammar instruction focused tasks serve another purpose. They aim to create contexts for the incidental acquisition of the target feature. Thus, students are not told what the target is. They are encouraged to orientate to the task as a “language user” rather than as a



Le légendaire hêtre de Ponthus, dans la forêt de Paimpont (F).

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“language learner” so that attention to the target structure arises naturally through the performance of the task.

Focused tasks can be input-based or output-based. In an input-based task learners are presented with L2 input (oral or written) which they need to comprehend in order to achieve the outcome of the task. Thus, an input-based task does not require production on the part of the learner. However, learners are not prevented from speaking and, in fact often do so when they fail to comprehend. Input-based tasks are based on the assumption that learners will pick up new linguistic forms through exposure to the input providing that (1) they are able to comprehend the input and (2) they notice the new forms. Input-based tasks can be used to help students acquire new grammatical structures. Output-based tasks aim to elicit production of the target structure. They are best suited to helping learners obtain greater control of grammatical structures that they have partially acquired but are not yet using with a high level of accuracy.

Shintani & Ellis (2010) used a focused input-based task with a group of six-year old beginner Japanese learners of English. The task was designed to expose the children to exemplars of plural-*s* – an English structure that is difficult for Japanese learners as there is no equivalent structure in their mother tongue. The learners listened to sets of commands, which required them to identify the animal mentioned in each command. They showed their understanding by selecting the correct card from a set of picture cards displayed in front of them and then depositing the correct card in a pocket attached to a frieze of a zoo pinned to the wall of the classroom. Some of the commands contained a singular noun (e.g. *Please take the crocodile to the zoo.*). Other commands contained a plural noun (e.g. *Please take the crocodiles to the zoo.*). Thus, to carry out the task the learners had to distinguish whether the noun was singular or plural. Although this task was input-based, it inevitably led to interaction – initially in the learner’s mother tongue but later in English – as the learners struggled to understand the teacher’s commands. This interaction was crucial as it enabled the teacher to negotiate the meaning of the commands with the learners. Shintani & Ellis reported

that tests showed that all the students had developed the ability to distinguish singular and plural nouns receptively and some had begun to produce plural nouns correctly.

A good example of a focused output-based task is Samuda’s (2001) “Things in Pockets Task”. Table 3 provides a summary of this task and how it was used in a grammar lesson. The task was designed to create a “semantic space” for the use of epistemic modals. However, initially the students failed to use the target structure, opting instead for lexical markers (e.g. *possibly* and *probably*). The teacher attempted to induce the students to use the modal verbs by interweaving the use of them into the interaction during a class discussion. However, the students still failed to use the target structures. The teacher then resorted to a brief direct explanation – for example, “When you’re NOT 100% certain, you can use *must*. OK? Not he *is* a business man but he *must* be a businessman”. At this point, the students began to use the target forms but not always correctly. The teacher responded to their attempts by providing corrective feedback. Samuda was primarily interested in demonstrating how a task-based lesson can facilitate the students’ use of the target form but she also provided evidence from a test that some learning had taken place.

These task-based lessons illustrate two important points about implicit grammar teaching. First, the task needs to create a context for the purposeful and natural use of the target structure (i.e. students must be primarily focused on achieving the outcome of the task).

Table 3: Things in Pocket Task (Samuda, 2001)

Task materials	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Aim – students asked to guess who they thought the person might be 2. Objects found in a person’s coat pocket. 3. Chart to be completed by the students indicating the degree of probability of the person’s identity (e.g. age, gender, profession)
Target grammatical structure	Epistemic modals (e.g. <i>might</i> and <i>must</i>) for expressing degrees of possibility/probability.
Stages in the lesson	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students work in groups to complete charts. 2. Class discussion of the students’ predictions. 3. Teacher provides brief grammatical explanation of use of epistemic modals. 4. Further class discussion of students’ predictions.

Second, intervention by the teacher has an important role. This intervention can be unobtrusive as when the teacher negotiates for meaning with the students as in Shintani and Ellis' study. Sometimes, however, it will need to be more obtrusive as when Samuda provided a brief explanation of the grammar point. Feedback is crucial. In Shintani & Ellis, it took the form of the negotiation for meaning when the learners failed to understand a command. In Samuda it took the form of both corrective feedback (e.g. the use of recasts to reformulate learner utterances that did not contain the use of the target structure or where the target structure was used incorrectly) and, at one point, a brief explicit explanation of the target structure. To a very considerable degree the effectiveness of a focused task depends on the teacher's skill in fostering understanding or production of the target feature.

Conclusion

In this article, I have made the case for two types of grammar teaching – explicit grammar teaching involving consciousness-raising tasks and implicit grammar teaching involving focused tasks. In the case of the former the aim is simply to help learners develop an explicit representation of a grammatical rule. The rationale for such an approach is that it is very difficult to ensure acquisition of implicit knowledge through explicit instruction. Thus the aim should be the lesser goal of developing explicit knowledge. This is of value to learners because they can use it to monitor for accuracy and it also facilitates the long-term processes involved in the acquisition of implicit knowledge. In the case of the latter, the aim is to influence the acquisition of implicit knowledge directly either by drawing attention to the use of a specific grammatical form by means of an input-based task or

creating a context for the meaningful and purposeful use of a specific grammatical form by means of output-based tasks.

These two approaches differ radically from mainstream grammar teaching involving presentation–practice–production (PPP). CR tasks have a much more limited aim – to help learners form an explicit representation of a grammatical rule. Task-based grammar teaching based on focused tasks omits the presentation and practice stages and goes straight to the production stage. It aims to facilitate the development of grammar by drawing attention to form while students are communicating. PPP has been found to help grammar learning but it makes an assumption about the way grammar is learned (i.e. that learners can be led from explicit to implicit knowledge through practice) that is not supported by what we know about an L2 is learned – as many teachers have discovered when they see that even after a well-executed PPP lesson their students still fail to use the target structure accurately in the communicative speech.

Grammar teaching will prove most effective if it takes account of how learners learn grammar. The proposals for teaching grammar I have advocated do not guarantee instant success but they are more clearly compatible with how learners learn. The grammar lesson has the best chance of success if teachers do not to teach grammar but focus instead on facilitating its development.

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