

## EXPLICIT GRAMMAR RULES AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF INTERMEDIATE IRANIAN EFL LEARNER'S KNOWLEDGE OF PAST TENSES

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### ABSTRACT

*The present article presents an empirical research study that examines EFL learners' awareness of grammatical structures when they speak spontaneously in group work tasks. In this study, 5 intermediate EFL learners of English were audio-recorded while working on a small group work task. The past tense structures used correctly by the individual participants were assigned and the participants who produced them were later interviewed in a separate test session. The task in the test session required the participants to explain the rules underlying the tenses assigned for them. The results of the test revealed that in most cases, the participants had an explicit knowledge and high awareness of the rules underlying the correct tenses used. The net result of the study indicates that there were few grammatical structures that learners knew implicitly and didn't have any awareness of their rules. For EFL teachers, the study offers that providing learners with explicit grammar rules can contribute to successful foreign language learning.*

**Keywords:** Explicit grammar rules, explicit knowledge, awareness

### INTRODUCTION

Owing to EFL learners' difficulties in learning grammatical rules and structures inside the classroom many researchers and EFL teachers around the world have become primarily interested in investigating and offering appropriate techniques for teaching grammar in their classes. Among the studies which have investigated into the effects of different variables on learning grammar those which have studied the notions of implicit/explicit learning and teaching as well as implicit/explicit knowledge seem to have been of paramount significance. There appears to be a great amount of literature on studies that looked through the merits of exploiting implicit and explicit instruction. A comprehensive review of the aforementioned notions can be found in DeKeyser (2003).

Our personal experience as a teacher has shown that many adult EFL learners have appeared to be unresponsive to implicit learning and feel slightly nervous when they come to grammatical items they seem to have learnt implicitly. Their main problem may be lack of awareness of grammatical items they know implicitly. It should be mentioned that the personal experience mentioned here does not contradict the findings and studies carried out to support the usefulness of implicit learning and teaching. It should only be considered as a statement reporting adult EFL learners' main concern regarding grammar learning in our language schools in Iran where the emphasis is mainly on communicative abilities and fluency rather than accuracy. To try to find a solution to the aforementioned problems the present study aims at investigating into the ways in which explicit grammar instruction may be helpful in foreign language learning situations.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There have been several definitions for the notions of implicit and explicit knowledge in SLA literature. Among those Ellis's (2008, pp. 6-7) definition of implicit and explicit knowledge has been the most salient one. His definition of implicit knowledge is as following:

Implicit knowledge is intuitive, procedural, systematically variable, and automatic and thus available for use in fluent unplanned language use. It is not verbalizable. According to some theorists, it is only learnable before learners reach a critical age.

He also defined explicit knowledge as knowledge that:

Is conscious, declarative, anomalous, and inconsistent (. . .) and is only accessible through controlled processing in planned language use. It is verbalizable, in which case it entails semi-technical or technical metalanguage. Like any type of factual knowledge, it is potentially learnable at any age.

Implicit and explicit learning have also been defined by other scholars. For instance implicit learning refers to "acquisition of knowledge about the underlying structure of a complex stimulus environment by a process that takes place naturally, simply and without conscious operations," while explicit learning refers to "a more conscious operation where the individual makes and tests hypotheses in search for a structure" (N. Ellis, 1994, p. 2). Schmidt (1994) argued that "implicit and explicit *learning* and implicit and explicit *knowledge* are related but distinct concepts that need to be separated" (p. 2).

Reviewing SLA literature reveals that both implicit and explicit knowledge are significant factors to take into account when considering second or foreign language learning. The main point here is that EFL and ESL teachers have always been in doubt about taking teaching strategies offering implicit and explicit instruction. To us, we had better pay careful attention to Ellis (2002b) who offers second language teachers to use consciousness raising strategies in their instruction of explicit knowledge. According to Ellis, this will facilitate acquisition of implicit knowledge. By consciousness rising he means the kind of teaching activities used by language teachers to help students develop declarative knowledge.

Ellis (2004) tried to examine L2 explicit knowledge from two aspects. First, it investigated explicit knowledge as a construct. Second, he aimed to find out how L2 explicit knowledge can be measured. His article aimed at reviewing how explicit knowledge has been operationalized in L2 acquisition research and explained the instruments used in measuring second language explicit knowledge. The net result of his article was some guidelines for investigating explicit knowledge as analyzed knowledge and metalanguage. Ellis (2004, p. 230) proposed that:

Explicit knowledge of language needs to be viewed as part of declarative memory, which is distinct from, although certainly related to, the processes through which this memory is constructed (i.e., learning) and from the uses to which it is put (i.e., performance).

Ellis (2004) identifies eight key characteristics of explicit knowledge and defines them one by one. These eight characteristics include: 1. explicit knowledge is conscious. 2. Explicit knowledge is declarative. 3. L2 learners' declarative rules are often imprecise and inaccurate. 4. The development of a learner's explicit knowledge can take place on two planes. 5. Explicit knowledge is generally accessible through controlled processing. 6. Any language task that a learner finds difficult may naturally result in an attempt to exploit explicit

knowledge. 7. Explicit knowledge is potentially verbalizable. 8. Explicit knowledge is learnable.

Terrell (1991) also provided reasons for the usefulness of using explicit grammar instruction in language classes. Terrell argued for three reasons which lend support to the usefulness of explicit grammar teaching. The first reason Terrell offered is that it is helpful in segmenting the otherwise overwhelming input. The second reason is that it is advantageous in establishing meaningful links and the third reason is that it helps to improve the learners' output.

There are some theoreticians who disagree with explicit grammar instruction. For instance, Krashen (1992, 1993) questioned the validity of the claims that explicit grammar instruction is useful. He argued that such teaching techniques in the classroom is fruitless since it is not possible for the learners to use explicit grammar rules in communication, otherwise the rules are simple and the learners are genius. According to Krashen a good alternative to explicit grammar instruction would be providing learners with as much "comprehensible input" as possible. He says, this would facilitate inducing grammar rules from "comprehensible input" without any consciousness. Though Krashen has always been a proponent of implicit learning which is opposite explicit teaching, his argumentations has rarely been based on direct tests and controlled experimentations. Hence, his claim that implicit learning tends to outperform explicit learning and instruction seems to remain ambiguous and controversial (Long, 1988).

Krashen's view on implicit learning has been relatively rejected by Lightbown and Spada (1990). They argued that their studies revealed that when teachers go through explicit grammar instruction, learners are more likely to gain accuracy of the grammatical items taught explicitly. Ellis (2005) also notes that if learners know the grammar rules explicitly, this will help them notice the structures that exemplify the rules in the input. In addition, explicit grammar knowledge can be helpful in obtaining more comprehensible input.

Adult learners on the other hand, are also able to understand how the target language they are attempting to learn works. This would be the result of their knowledge of the rules underlying different grammatical rules.

### **Awareness**

Awareness is defined as an individual's subjective experience that shows he or she is experiencing a stimulus or cognitive content. Allport (1988) proposes there must be three conditions to be able to claim one is aware of a particular experience. First, one should show a cognitive or behavioral change. For instance, a learner may start adding -ed endings at the end of past forms of the regular verbs as a result of his or her exposure to the past tense in a particular context. Second, the person is to be able to report that he or she is aware of a particular experience. Third, he must be able to describe it. For instance, he must be able to describe the rules underlying a particular tense in English. Leow (2000) categorizes awareness into two taxonomies. The first is low awareness in which the first two conditions are met and high awareness when all three conditions are met.

Distinguishing between learning and knowledge seems to be a prerequisite to understanding the role of awareness in learning. Reber (1989) describes implicit learning as "the process by which knowledge about the rule governed complexities of the stimulus environment is acquired independently of conscious attempts to do so" (p. 219). This is different from explicit learning where is aware of processing the input.

## The Present Study

In the light of the above-mentioned studies the present article is going to investigate whether learners understand the grammatical rules underlying the grammatical structures they use while they are working together in small group work tasks. It also aims at investigating their degree of awareness of the grammatical rules underlying past tenses. Taking the aim of the present study into account the following research questions were formulated:

1. Can EFL learners of English provide explanation of the rules underlying past tenses they use in their spontaneous speech in group work tasks?
2. What degree of awareness do they have regarding the rules underlying grammatical structures they use in their spontaneous speech in group work tasks?

## METHOD

### Participants

The participants of the study were 5 EFL learners of English who were studying English at an English Language School in Chalous, Iran. Their ages ranged between 19 – 26. Their average exposure to English was about 7 years. Based on an in-house placement test and an interview, the participants were considered to be intermediate learners. The language school's curriculum and syllabus was in accordance with the weak version of communicative language teaching (Howatt, 1984, p. 279).

The participants were 5 intermediate female Iranian language learners. Since all participants of the study were learning English in Iran, they were described as foreign language learners.

### Procedure

The participants of the study were assigned into a group of five participants and were asked to work on a group work task as a part of their classroom lesson. Although the participants were familiar with the nature of group work tasks they were once more told that the purpose of the task is to put participants in a situation where they can talk to their group members, but this time their voice will be recorded. The task given to the participants was designed in a way which was likely to elicit past tense structures learnt by the intermediate participants of the group.

The overall time allocated to the task was 10 minutes. After the task, the researcher transcribed the group's audio recorded voices and assigned the correct grammatical structures regarding the usage of the past tenses. The participants were then called to participate in an interview session with the researcher. He interviewed the participants asking them to explain the grammatical rules underlying the tenses they used. Finally, the result of the interview and the transcriptions became the subject of data analysis of the study.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The transcriptions were carefully analyzed by the researcher and the past tenses which were used correctly by the participants were put forward for analysis. The obligatory occasions in which the participants were to use the appropriate past tense were as following: simple past: 32 items, past continuous: 32 items as well as the past perfect: 26 items, out of which 68 items were used correctly. The formula used for this analysis is as following:

$$\text{Target – Like Use} = \frac{\text{n correct suppliance in obligatory contexts}}{\text{n obligatory contexts}} \times 100 = \frac{68}{90} \times 100 = 75\%$$

Using the abovementioned formula we were able to conclude that the participants had 75 percent Target-Like Use. 75 percent of correct suppliance of the past tenses seems to be a good reason helping us conclude that these foreign language learners have got a relatively good knowledge of the past tenses at the intermediate level. Within the next step it seemed to be the time to consider whether this amount of correct suppliance was due to the participants' high awareness or explicit knowledge of the past tenses or other factors. The results of the interview which are illustrated in tables 1 and 2 show how the participants of the study performed. It revealed that for approximately 75% of the items they had high awareness and explicit knowledge of the rules underlying past tenses used in group work tasks.

**Table 1. Participants' performance on past tenses**

| <i>Subject number</i> | <i>Obligatory Occasions</i> | <i>Correct Suppliance</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------|
| 1                     | 18                          | 12                        | 66%            |
| 2                     | 20                          | 15                        | 75%            |
| 3                     | 17                          | 13                        | 76.47%         |
| 4                     | 19                          | 18                        | 94%            |
| 5                     | 16                          | 10                        | 62.5%          |
| Total                 | 90                          | 68                        | 75.5%          |

**Table 2. Participants' knowledge of the past tenses' rules**

| <i>Subject number</i> | <i>Correct Suppliance</i> | <i>Explicit knowledge/high awareness of correct suppliance</i> |     |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|--|-----|
| 1                     | 12                        | 10   | 83% |
| 2                     | 15                        | 13   | 86% |
| 3                     | 13                        | 11   | 84% |
| 4                     | 18                        | 16   | 88% |
| 5                     | 10                        | 8  | 80% |
| Total                 | 68                        | 58   | 85% |

## CONCLUSION

The study reported here has made an attempt to discover something about the state of grammar teaching in Iranian English language Schools concerning problems of implementing pedagogical methods of grammar teaching in language classrooms. The results of the study paint a picture of the ways grammar can be taught in intermediate EFL classes in Iran, which may be interesting and inspiring for those who advocate explicit grammar instruction.

The analysis of the study reveals that the participants were generally highly aware of the grammatical rules underlying the past tenses they used in their speech. In other words, it

showed that when an individual participant used a tense correctly he had an explicit knowledge of it. The results show that it is important to bear in mind the fact that the learners can also benefit from explicit presentation and instruction of grammar as well as implicit teaching.

The recommendation we would like to extend based on the net results of the study is that EFL teachers in Iran should devote some classroom time to teaching grammar explicitly while using other strategies aside because the result of this study does not aim at rejecting other ways of grammar instruction.

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