

The Justification for Explicit Grammar Instruction is Overstated¹

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Abstract

Whether or not to teach grammar explicitly is an issue that has long been debated in the field of SLA. There seems to be a growing consensus among many researchers now in support of embedding some element of explicit instruction within a communicative curriculum. The main arguments in support of explicit instruction are threefold: two widely cited meta-analyses, the fossilization hypothesis, and meeting student expectations. However, none of these arguments are as compelling as they are sometimes made out to be. The studies included in the meta-analyses mostly evaluate explicit knowledge rather than communicative ability; forms that are candidates for fossilization tend to be communicatively redundant anyway; and student expectations stem from common practices, but should not drive them. Furthermore, this article suggests there is a critical element that has been missing from the debate on explicit instruction, namely individual differences between students. The question of whether, which, and how much grammar to teach likely depends on the interests and goals of the particular students being taught. Therefore, arguments for or against explicit instruction should always consider the context rather than seeking a one-size-fits-all best practice.

Resumen

Enseñar gramática o no explícitamente es un tema que se ha debatido durante mucho tiempo en el campo de la lingüística. Parece haber un consenso cada vez mayor entre muchos investigadores ahora en apoyo de incorporar algún elemento de instrucción explícita dentro de un plan de estudios comunicativo. Los principales argumentos a favor de la instrucción explícita son tres: dos metanálisis ampliamente citados, la hipótesis de fosilización y el cumplimiento de las expectativas de los estudiantes. Sin embargo, ninguno de estos argumentos es tan convincente como a veces se cree. Los estudios incluidos en los metanálisis evalúan principalmente el conocimiento explícito en lugar de la capacidad comunicativa; las formas que son candidatas a la fosilización tienden a ser comunicativamente redundantes de todos modos; y las expectativas de los estudiantes se derivan de prácticas comunes, pero no deben impulsarlas. Además, este artículo sugiere que hay un elemento crítico que ha faltado en el debate sobre la instrucción explícita, a saber, las diferencias individuales entre los estudiantes. La cuestión de enseñar gramática, y cuál y cuánta gramática probablemente depende de los intereses y objetivos de los estudiantes particulares a los que se enseña. Por tanto, los argumentos a favor o en contra de la instrucción explícita siempre deben considerar el contexto en lugar de buscar una mejor práctica única para todos.

Introduction

The role of explicit grammar instruction is one of the most fundamental controversies in the field of SLA. The practice fell out of vogue with Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis and the advent of communicative language teaching in the 1980s, but the last two decades have seen a resurgence of support for grammar teaching among researchers—although, granted, usually embedded in a communicative classroom environment. A great deal of the recent literature gives the impression that the question is all but settled, and the view that some explicit grammar instruction should be a critical component of all English language courses has almost become, yet again, an axiom. The danger with treating a controversy as though it has been resolved is that dissenting views are more likely to meet with rejection in peer review, thereby giving the impression of consensus where none exists. As a result, necessary research is not done, the debate fizzles out, and classroom practices inevitably reflect the orthodoxy. This article does not argue for or against explicit instruction, but it does suggest that the position taken by some academics that the question has been resolved is not yet supported by sufficiently robust evidence. Further investigation is warranted, and it should include an element which has hitherto been missing from the discussion, namely the variability of student goals and interests.

Justifications for Explicit Instruction and their Shortcomings

The most common justifications for explicit instruction are threefold: First, two widely cited meta-analyses supporting the practice; second, the fossilization hypothesis; and third, the necessity of meeting student expectations. However, these three arguments are not as convincing as they are sometimes made out to be.

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Right from the dawn of communicative language teaching, there was resistance. Some of this was rooted in findings that explicit instruction could accelerate acquisition under certain circumstances (Pienemann, 1984). The explicit instruction camp claimed empirical support with the publication of Norris and Ortega (2000) and later Spada and Tomita (2010). These two meta-analyses suggested that explicit instruction was effective, but critics—and at least one of the authors herself (Spada, 2014)—argue that the tests represented in the examined experiments assessed explicit knowledge rather than the implicit knowledge that is generally believed to be responsible for communication. The finding that explicit instruction improved explicit knowledge does nothing to discredit the hypothesis that acquisition, and not explicit learning, is the source of our communicative ability (Krashen, 1982).

Another justification for explicit instruction is rooted in the fossilization hypothesis (Selinker, 1972), which suggests that students will not acquire certain late forms even in optimum acquisition environments. Research on immersion classes in Canada (Swain, 1985) found that while students developed excellent fluency and comprehension, some grammatical errors persisted. However, one of the characteristics of late-acquired forms which might be candidates for fossilization is communicative redundancy (Roehr & Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2009). An example of a fossilized form is a speaker who persists in using an “Although..., but...” construction, even after years living in the States (Han & Lew, 2012). This sort of minor error has no impact on communication; in fact, native speakers make more egregious mistakes daily. As such, avoiding fossilization is only a priority for the small minority of English language learners who satisfy both of the following criteria—they consider accuracy to be their ultimate learning goal, and they have exhausted the full potential of communicative instruction.

Another argument for explicit instruction is to meet student expectations. Some studies (e.g., Brown, 2009) have found that language students prefer a grammar-based approach because they believe it to be more effective. It is true that meeting student expectations can improve their belief in the efficacy of the instruction, which can bring about positive results, whereas violating student expectations can result in disengagement and even discontinuation of studies (Schulz, 2001); however, it is also likely that ELT practitioners have greater expertise in the field of SLA than their students, and language teachers have been found to view explicit grammar instruction much less favourably than their students (Schulz, 1996). It is questionable in any field to allow the client’s uninformed beliefs to override professional advice vis-à-vis best practices. Surely, in cases where client beliefs conflict with best practices, it should be incumbent on the expert to convince the client of the truth rather than to adopt substandard practices—as recommended by Nunan (1986). Some theorists argue that learner training should be part of language classes to help “mediate L2 learners’ dysfunctional beliefs” (Gabillon, 2012, p. 97). Therefore, if explicit grammar instruction is found to be less effective than other pedagogies, meeting student expectations is hardly sufficient justification to continue using obsolete methodologies. After all, expectations are often born of common practices, and once practices change, so, too, will expectations. Thus, this argument does not stand up to scrutiny; if explicit instruction is found to be superior, then it should be used regardless of student beliefs, but if it is not, then student preconceptions do not justify its use.

An Element Missing from the Debate

What a lot of explicit instruction supporters ignore is that the most effective language lesson is one that holds a student’s interest. In fact, making language classes interesting is one of Dörnyei and Csizér’s (1998) Ten Commandments for motivating language learners. Krashen (2011) goes even further suggesting that language classes should be “compelling”, given that compelling input eliminates the need for motivation. Krashen (2015) suggests few students find grammar to be compelling subject matter. In fact, Loewen et al. (2009) found over a quarter of students characterized grammar as boring, with over half ascribing some other negative characteristic to the topic. It is telling that despite this, to this day there have been very few studies on student boredom in the EFL context (Dumančić, 2018; Kruk, 2021), suggesting that student interest is rarely taken into consideration when researchers are debating the merits of explicit instruction.

Teaching forms explicitly might also have a negative impact on other critical affective psychological factors; in fact, some studies have found that even students who believe grammar instruction is useful do not enjoy the process (Jean & Simard, 2011). This is problematic because positive emotions have been found to promote acquisition (Saito et al., 2018). Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) in particular would suffer from activities viewed as boring or unenjoyable, and FLE is strongly correlated to acquisition (Dewaele & Alfawzan,

2018; Dewaele et al., 2017). Some forms of explicit instruction, like explicit error correction, actually harm students' Willingness to Communicate (WTC) (Ghahari & Piruznejad, 2016). Nor is grammar instruction likely to inspire students to become lifelong learners of English once the required course is over. In fact, a 2004 report indicated that many students blamed their loss of interest and withdrawal from their L2 classes on grammar instruction (Canadian Parents for French, 2004, cited in Jean & Simard, 2011).

If explicit instruction can impart explicit knowledge of a particular grammatical form to students at the cost of their learning motivation, then it is a case of winning a (somewhat insignificant) battle but losing the war. There are certainly students for whom English syntactic structures hold a deep and unabiding interest. For such students—and for those whose ultimate goal is accuracy—it might be prudent to include some explicit grammatical instruction in the curriculum. However, for those many students who find rules of English grammar less than compelling and who want to improve their ability to use the language, it is likely better to stick with a communicative approach that is tailored to meet the interests of the group. As such, making sweeping proclamations about whether it is better to teach grammar explicitly completely ignores the fact that every student is different, and any argument about whether or not grammar instruction is called for should include a discussion of the context.

Conclusion

Currently, many teachers hedge their bets by incorporating explicit grammar instruction into a communicative curriculum, and the implication by some researchers is that the evidence unambiguously supports this practice. However, it should be remembered that grammar instruction and communicative language teaching is a zero-sum game; in the finite number of hours available in a language class, time spent on one activity necessarily means it is taken away from another. Furthermore, there might be unintended consequences to explicit grammar instruction in the form of lost student motivation and interest. As such, given the circumstantial nature of the evidence supporting explicit instruction and the very real possibility of serious drawbacks, this writer would suggest that the debate should not be seen as settled yet. With researchers unable to reach a consensus on whether students benefit from being taught what forms and how best to teach them, perhaps they should instead be asking themselves which particular type of student might benefit from explicit instruction in what context, and which likely does not.

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