

Implicit and explicit learning

Does *explicit* learning lead to *implicit* knowledge?

- This is what Ellis tries to answer.
- His strategy:
 - Look at instruction that encourages *explicit* knowledge.
 - See if it improves *implicit* knowledge.

But implicit knowledge is hard to test

- How do you know whether it is there?
- Usual way to tell: free production
- Compare learners who have had the instruction with those who have not, and see how they do on free production.

Reasons why you would not expect *explicit* learning to become *implicit*

- Explicit rules may be completely unlike needed implicit rules.
- Not clear that enough examples can be given in a lesson/unit to allow implicit knowledge to develop.
- Examples used for explicit learning may distort input, mislead learners, delay acquisition, etc.

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Explicit rules may be completely unlike needed implicit rules

- We can *explicitly* present a grammar point in a certain way, but how do we know that the brain deals with it this same way *implicitly*?
- Example: *He is* → *he's*

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- How much exposure is needed for irregular verbs in English (and their families!) to develop?
- A lot!

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- In other words, we should always follow the rule ...

First, do no harm.

- We don't want to do anything that will harm the learner's implicit learning.
- But could classroom activities actually do harm?
- Some of them probably do.

How could a grammatical activity do harm?!?

- Imagine an activity that encourages students to focus on a misleading generalization.
- Such an activity could encourage the students' implicit learning to go down the wrong path.
- Unfortunately, there are many such examples.

An example

- Many textbook exercises focus on areas where the target language makes a distinction that the native language does not.
- For instance, many Romance languages have two past tenses (with slightly different meanings), while English has only one.

Spanish preterite vs. imperfect

- Two ways to say “Juan went to Barcelona”
- Preterite: Juan **fue** a Barcelona.
Action completed.
- Imperfect: Juan **iba** a Barcelona.
Action not (yet) completed, or action done repeatedly.

Why this is hard

- You must choose. There is no “neutral” past tense form.
- English doesn't make this same distinction.

The classic exercise

- Anoche yo _____ (ir) a un concierto.
'Last night I went to a concert.'
- Possible answers:
 - (a) Anoche yo fui a un concierto.
 - (b) Anoche yo iba a un concierto.
- The classic right answer: (a)

What could possibly be wrong with this?

- Students need to learn to make the preterite/imperfect distinction, and this exercise addresses exactly that.
- All languages make difficult distinctions of one sort or another, so this type of exercise would seem to be needed in all of them.

But notice...

Problem #1: The subject pronoun

- Spanish verbs agree with the subject:

fui I went

fue he/she went etc.

- Subject must be included, so that student knows how to conjugate verb:

Anoche **yo** _____ (ir) a un concierto.

The result?

- Almost every sentence in this exercise has a subject pronoun.
- In real life, Spanish uses overt subject pronouns only in specific discourse conditions (emphasis, contrast, etc.).

What's wrong with this picture?
Hint: It's not the dog.



(AP PHOTO)

The result?

- This exercise desensitizes learners to the presence of a subject pronoun, encouraging them to think of this as the default. Possible long-term damage to their implicit grammar.

Problem #2: How students approach this exercise

- Students are taught (or quickly figure out) to look for:

Specific point in past → preterite

Time frame in past → imperfect

- In our example:

Anoche yo _____ (ir) a un concierto.

Anoche 'last night' is specific point in past, so use preterite.

WWRSD:

What Would a Real Speaker Do?

- When uttering a sentence, real speakers surely don't look for a time expression in the sentence to decide between preterite and imperfect.
- Instead, they know what each tense means, and they choose the one that best expresses their idea.

By training students to look for a time expression:

- We are training them to use exactly the wrong strategy to choose between the predicate and imperfect.
- Again, possible long-term damage to their developing implicit grammar.

Problem #3: The “right” answer

- Students understandably get the idea that there is a single right answer.
- But this is often not true.

In our example:

Preterite:

(a) Anoche yo fui a un concierto.

Imperfect:

(b) Anoche yo iba a un concierto.

(a) is likely, (b) requires more imagination, but both are clearly possible.

It just depends what you are trying to say.

Summary: why this exercise could harm learners

1. It desensitizes them to the use of subject pronouns.
2. It trains them to use exactly the wrong strategy in choosing between the two forms.
3. It encourages them to think there is only one right answer, when this is not true.

Why do we do exercises like this?

- They are easy to create or find in books.
- Students feel that they are mastering something.
- Teachers feel that they are teaching something.
- Everybody is happy.
- But it's a fool's paradise.

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So far...

- We have seen reasons to be skeptical that explicit learning will transform itself into implicit knowledge.

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Next...

- Let's see what research shows.
- Is explicit → implicit ever possible under any circumstances?

Ellis' results

- He refers to explicit instruction as:
Form-Focused Instruction (FFI)
- Two types:
 - Focus on Formss
 - Focus on Form

The two types of FFI

Focus on Forms

Focus on Form

Definition:

Sentence
manipulation

Incidental
attention to form
in context of
communication

**Effect on
implicit
knowledge:**

Apparently no
effect

Sometimes has
effect

Focus on Forms: s: examples

Make the following sentence passive:

People eat sandwiches.

Focus on Forms: examples

Create a proper sentence using the following elements (in the order given):

the/book/write/famous/author

Focus on Forms: examples

Write the correct form:

The car was _____ (sell) for \$1700.

All of these examples

- Require students to manipulate or create sentences.
- Do not require students to pay attention to meaning.

Focus on Form: examples Interaction

Recasts

A: So he go to the store.

B: OK, he went to the store, and then
what happened?

Focus on Form: examples Interaction

Clarification requests

A: And they have the chwach there.

B: The what?

Focus on Form: examples

Text enhancement

The mouse ran down the hall and jump**ed** onto Tom's bed. Tom felt something fuzzy near his ear but thought it was the corner of his pillow. He reach**ed** up to touch it, but by then the mouse was already in his hair. The mouse made a nice little nest in Tom's hair, and neither Tom nor the mouse woke up until morning.

Focus on Form: examples

Structured input

Which of the following are true?

- a) Sandwiches are usually eaten by people.
- b) The computer was invented by George Washington.
- c) French is spoken in Indonesia.
- d) The blouse was removed by Justin Timberlake.
- e) People are often ridden by horses.
- f) Horses are often ridden by people.

All of these examples encourage students to pay attention to:

(1) The grammatical form

AND

(2) The meaning

Summary

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Implications for teaching from L2 research (VanPatten)

1. Lots of input.
2. Lots of interaction.
3. Production should be meaning-based.
4. Focus on form
5. Be careful what you expect of learners.

See you on Wednesday!

8:00 – 11:00