



2528-9705

Örgütsel Davranış Araştırmaları Dergisi

Journal Of Organizational Behavior Research

Cilt / Vol.: 8, Sayı / Is.: S, Yıl/Year: 2023, Kod/ID: 23S0-965



Comparing Students' and Teachers' Perspective on Explicit and Implicit Grammar Instructions at Colorado State University.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perspectives of learners and teachers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) regarding explicit and implicit grammar instruction. Customized questionnaires consisting of 18 items were distributed among 10 teachers and twenty-nine students at INTO Colorado State University. Participants were also asked to select a preferred grammar instruction method and provide a brief explanation of their choice. T-test analysis revealed no significant difference between students and teachers' perspectives on implicit and explicit grammar instruction. Descriptive statistics showed that, concerning explicit grammar instruction, students ranked 'memorizing grammar rules' and 'awareness of what is being taught' as their preferred method of learning grammar points. Teachers also considered 'awareness' an important factor. However, teachers rated 'memorization' as the least effective teaching method and favored 'providing students with information about grammar rules' as an integral part of explicit grammar instruction. Since both groups emphasized the importance of 'focusing on meaning and communication' and 'awareness of grammar structures', this study suggests incorporating pedagogical activities focusing on these two notions for teachers at INTO Colorado State University.

Keywords: *Perspectives, Second Language Acquisition, Explicit grammar instruction, Implicit grammar instruction*

INTRODUCTION

The investigation of second language acquisition (SLA) has significantly influenced our understanding of how to approach teaching grammar. Within the field of SLA, efforts have been made to address the fundamental questions of whether grammar should be taught, what specific aspects of grammar should be prioritized, and how best to teach it. In this section, I aim to consolidate previous studies that have explored these inquiries. While SLA does not offer clear answers to these questions, it expands the horizons of language pedagogy, providing valuable insights for language educators.

Literature Review

Should we teach grammar?

The inquiry into grammar instruction stemmed from early Second Language Acquisition (SLA) debates, examining the significance of explicit versus implicit language learning. This debate revolves around the conscious versus unconscious acquisition of language when individuals are

exposed to linguistic input. Krashen (1981) asserted that teaching grammar played a marginal role in acquiring languages, suggesting that individuals would naturally progress if provided with understandable input and motivation. (Ellis, 2006)

Several studies on how people learn English support the idea mentioned earlier. Some researchers (Bailey et al., 1974; Dulay & Burt, 1974) believed that people who speak different languages naturally pick up English word parts, or morphology, leading to the suggestion that the process for learning first and second languages is similar. This also relates to the idea of Universal Grammar (UG) and how it applies to learning a second language. Researchers Goldschneider and DeKeyser (2001) argued that if the principles of Universal Grammar (UG) apply to learning a second language, then second language learning, like first language learning, mostly happens through using those principles and the words spoken or written. (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004)

New studies in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have led to a reassessment of the role of grammar in teaching L2. The reconsideration is based on several key findings. Schmidt (2001) suggests that paying close attention to grammar, which he calls "noticing," is crucial in learning settings. Skehan (1998) found that learners struggle to simultaneously understand both meaning and grammar. Furthermore, an interest in L2 grammar teaching stems from the discovery of patterns in how L2 learners develop. According to Pienemann (1999), although specific development patterns remain fixed while teaching grammar, other language structures can benefit from teaching. Finally, evidence from various studies highlights the positive impact of grammar instruction. Ellis (2002a), for instance, states that while taught language learning might not change how learners naturally progress, it does improve both the speed and the final level of L2 acquisition. (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004)

How Should Grammar be Taught?

Some concepts related to Implicit and explicit instruction

Understanding how grammar instruction can be classified as implicit or explicit involves acknowledging key distinctions regarding the nature of linguistic knowledge and the learning of languages. Implicit knowledge, characterized by intuition and procedure, resembles native speakers' understanding but is also systematic, whereas explicit knowledge is conscious albeit less consistent (Ellis, 2009a). The acquisition of implicit knowledge tends to decline with age, contrasting with explicit knowledge, which is less limited. (Bialystok, 1994, as cited in Bielak & Pawlak, 2013)

Expanding on this, the implicit-explicit distinction also encompasses the learning process. Implicit learning occurs unconsciously, where the learner is not directly informed of what is being learned (DeKeyser, 2003). In contrast, the explicit process involves the conscious awareness of the grammar points being acquired. (Ellis, 2008a)

Essential Factors to Understanding Implicit and Explicit Concepts in Pedagogy

One vital factor to consider is the distinction between inductive and deductive instruction. Celce-Murcia (2001) offers clear explanations for both. Inductive instruction requires learners to



derive rules from the material, while deductive instruction involves the instructor providing rules that learners then apply (Baytar, 2014). The extent to which learners are aware of instruction distinguishes explicit from implicit approaches. If learners are directly informed of the rules, it constitutes explicit instruction. Instructors can use the inductive approach as formative assessment – they can observe student’s understanding while teaching and adapt the lesson accordingly. (Baytar, 2014)

Another important contrast to bear in mind in explicit/implicit instruction is whether to focus on form or forms, first introduced by Long (1991). According to Ellis (2010), emphasizing forms follows a conventional method, highlighting language rules without purposeful interactions. In contrast, focus on form, as described by Long (1991) and highlighted by Harmer (2007), emphasizes how language is used in daily interactions. (Baytar, 2014)

Researchers’ Perspectives on Implicit and Explicit Grammar Instruction

Using both methods could be helpful based on the learning situation. If the language form is too hard for the learners, teaching the rules directly – deductive- can be very helpful. On the other hand, if the task requires increasing awareness (Celce-Murcia, 2001), an inductive approach would be a better alternative. Celce-Murcia (2001) also says that some students might struggle with the inductive approach because it needs critical thinking and problem-solving, which not all students are adept at. (Baytar, 2014)

Although both implicit and explicit types are widely preferred, they have shortcomings. According to Ellis (2001a), implicit instruction leads to memorizing patterns and sentences. However, it might be challenging for adult learners to reach a high level of competence without a decent amount of analytical skills. In addition, as stated by Ponniah (2008), learners of foreign languages are more likely to pay attention to forms and rules only when a grammar test is at hand, not while partaking in actual communication. (Uzan, 2013)

Students and Teachers’ Perspectives on Implicit and Explicit Grammar Instruction

This section will examine previous studies investigating how students’ and teachers’ attitudes might differ on grammar instruction. (To see the overview of the result, see Table 1). In his research study, Wang (1999) surveyed students’ and teachers’ perspectives on grammar instruction in Taiwan. The result of the study illustrated that the overwhelming majority of learners favored the explicit approach and that most teachers also preferred and incorporated the explicit method in their lesson plans.

Brindley’s (1984) research among Adult Migrant Education in Australia indicated that instructors favored communicative language teaching activities, whereas learners showed interest in more direct, explicit grammar instruction. Schultz’s (1996, 2001) papers portray differences among grammar instructors and learners in the USA and Colombia, with learners more favorable than teachers towards direct grammar teaching. (Burgess and Etherington, 2002)

Burgess and Etherington (2002) studied 48 teachers in British university language centers to explore their views on teaching grammar in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) context. They used a five-point attitude scale to gather responses. The research showed that most teachers view grammatical knowledge as important for their students and support explicit teaching



methods. In a separate survey involving preparatory and secondary school EFL teachers and students, Al-Kabani (2004) found that students preferred explicit grammar instruction, while teachers leaned towards implicit methods. Borg & Burns (2008) looked into the beliefs and practices of 176 English language teachers from 18 countries regarding integrating grammar. The teachers strongly believed in not teaching grammar in isolation, integrating it significantly into their teaching. In a study by Thu (2009) on ESL teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching, 11 teachers in California participated. Results indicated that teachers generally view the formal study of grammar as crucial for mastering a foreign or second language. They also preferred explicit grammar instruction over implicit methods. (Basoz, 2014)

Basoz (2014) conducted a study at Balıkesir University's English Language Teaching Department to explore 86 future EFL teachers' choices regarding grammar instruction types (implicit or explicit). The findings revealed a preference for implicit instruction over explicit methods.

Table 1

Summary of previous research on students' and teachers' perspectives of implicit and explicit grammar structure

Study	Country	Students vs teachers	Explicit	Implicit	Both
Brindley's (1984)	Australia	Students	<input type="checkbox"/>		
		Teachers			<input type="checkbox"/>
Wang (1999)	Taiwan	Students	<input type="checkbox"/>		
		Teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Schultz's (1996, 2001)	U.S.A and Colombia	Students	<input type="checkbox"/>		
		Teachers		<input type="checkbox"/>	
Burgess & Etherington (2002)	England	Students (not applied)			
		Teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Al-Kabani (2004)	Oman	Students	<input type="checkbox"/>		
		Teachers		<input type="checkbox"/>	
Borg & Burns (2008)	18 countries	Students (not applied)			
		Teachers		<input type="checkbox"/>	
Thu (2009)	U.S.A	Students (not applied)			
		Teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Basoz (2014)	Turkey	Students (not applied)			
		Teachers		<input type="checkbox"/>	

Upon closer examination of the table, patterns can be seen regarding the preference for grammar instruction between 1984 and 2014 in multiple countries. Within this study's scope, it was observed that learners exhibited a consistent preference for direct presentation of grammar structures rather than relying on guided discovery methods to induce these structures. In contrast, teachers displayed no consistent preference for implicit and explicit grammar instructions over the indicated period. This intriguing finding encourages further exploration to ascertain the potential pedagogical implications rooted in the convergence and divergence of learners' and instructors' perspectives on grammar instruction.

The Impact of Match/Mismatch of Students' and Teachers' Perspectives on Grammar Instruction and Some Pedagogical Suggestions

Horowitz (1990) suggests that there is often a difference in how students and teachers perceive the role of grammar, leading to potential negative impacts and a discouraging atmosphere in language instruction. Kern (1995) emphasizes the importance of understanding learners' and educators' beliefs in language learning within educational contexts. Research on learners' beliefs can anticipate conflicts that may lead to student frustration, anxiety, lack of motivation, and, in some cases, discontinuation of language studies (71). Schulz (2001) mentions that discrepancies may reduce the pedagogical face validity and limit student motivation, potentially demotivating students when their expectations do not align with teachers' classroom practices. (Pazaver & Wang, 2009)

To address these discrepancies, some general teaching guidelines can be considered. Firstly, teachers need to recognize that students' beliefs impact the effectiveness of the learning process. Therefore, they should clarify the objectives of activities and why they are relevant to language learning. Secondly, both teachers and students should discuss their beliefs about language learning. Clear expectations should be communicated, and any differences should be identified and addressed. Lastly, students can offer feedback on their teachers' language teaching methods. This can help evaluate how much teachers' practices align with students' expectations. (Hos & Kekec, 2015)

Objective and significance of the study

The main goal of this research is to explore potential matches or mismatches within the context of Academic English (AE) settings at Colorado State University. In light of the conflicting findings on the preferences for implicit and explicit grammar instruction among teachers and students, this research sought to investigate the perspectives of learners and language instructors within and across each group. This research contributes to the existing literature through several novel aspects. Firstly, it emphasizes the need for further research in AE settings within the United States. Secondly, the questionnaire employed in this study was specifically designed, with modified statements presented to both teachers and students. Thirdly, the questionnaire addresses the most crucial aspects of implicit and explicit grammar instruction based on the findings from the literature review. Lastly, to enhance the understanding of the study's results, participants from both groups were asked to provide explanations for their choices at the questionnaire's conclusion.

Research questions

To what extent do students' and teachers' preferences for implicit and explicit grammar instructions differ?

Null Hypothesis: There is no difference between teachers' and students' preferences for implicit and explicit grammar instructions.

1. Methodology

1.1 Participants



The survey involved the participation of twenty-nine students and ten teachers from INTO Colorado State University. Within INTO, there are three levels of Academic English (AE), with each level offering separate classes to develop all four language skills (i.e., Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking). The students, ranging in age from 19 to 40, represent various countries including Japan, Korea, Kuwait, and Brazil, where English is considered a foreign language. Two distinct student groups took part in the study: eighteen students from level two (whom I teach) and eleven students from level three. The teachers who participated included eight native English speakers and two non-native speakers. They were contracted instructors at INTO CSU, aged between 26 and 50, and comprised both males and females.

1.2 Instrument

To construct the questionnaire, two resources were utilized. Based on the comprehensive analysis of the literature review, key elements of implicit and explicit grammar instruction (e.g., order of teaching form and meaning, inductive versus deductive approaches, and learners' awareness level) were incorporated into the questionnaire items. Questionnaire items from four previous studies (Uzun, 2013; Basoz, 2014; Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Uysal & Yavuz, 2015) were also employed as a foundation, with necessary modifications made to align with the research at hand. Many of the statements were directly adapted from these four studies' questionnaires. However, since some questions were originally intended for general foreign language classes, they were reworded to specifically address grammar classes. Additionally, a statement addressing the role of implicit and explicit grammar instruction within the framework of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was included, given its prominent usage at INTO Colorado State University.

The questionnaire consisted of 18 statements, with nine pertaining to implicit grammar instruction and nine to explicit grammar instruction. Two versions were created: one for students and one for teachers, each with appropriate modifications. For instance, the statement "A lack of explicit grammar instruction leaves my students feeling insecure" in the teachers' version was adjusted to "I do not feel confident learning the grammar rules in texts, and I need my teacher to explain it to me" in the students' version. Employing a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," the questionnaire presented the mixed-up order of statements to teachers, while students were informed that odd-numbered questions related to explicit instruction and even-numbered questions pertained to implicit instruction. The questionnaire concluded with an open-ended question that prompted students and teachers to indicate their preferred grammar instruction method and provide the rationale behind their choice. To promote clarity, students were assisted with the open-ended question through the explicit definition of implicit and explicit grammar instruction.

1.3. Procedure

For this research, two distinct student groups were selected: eighteen students from my level two class and eleven students from level three. To assess the survey's suitability in terms of clarity, time constraints, and instructions, I had three students from my class complete the survey. Based on their feedback, I made adjustments to the allocated time and provided explicit definitions for implicit and explicit grammar instructions in the open-ended section. The survey was



administered in class, allowing students to seek clarification if needed. In terms of ethical considerations, both groups were assured that their information would remain confidential, and participation was entirely voluntary. To encourage optimal performance, a reward of approximately 4% for their progress achievements score was offered to my students, and a celebratory pizza party was organized for the level-three class to motivate participation. Fortunately, all students willingly participated, In contrast, their counterparts, the teachers, did not undergo a pilot survey, nor were any incentives provided. Nonetheless, all teachers agreed to participate voluntarily.

2. Data Analysis

The dataset used in this study comprised responses from twenty-nine students and ten teachers to a questionnaire examining their preference for implicit and explicit grammar instructions. Microsoft Excel was used to calculate the mean and standard deviation for each item, as well as the overall mean and standard deviation for both grammar instructions within each group. Alongside descriptive statistics, an independent t-test was conducted using the online tool provided by GraphPad (<https://www.graphpad.com/>) to determine if a significant difference existed between students' and teachers' perspectives on both grammar instructions. The data derived from students' and teachers' written reports explaining their preference for implicit and explicit grammar instruction were manually analyzed and utilized to support the descriptive statistics findings.

3. Results and discussions

To find out how students' and teachers' perspectives differ in both explicit and implicit grammar instructions, I compared the means of their differences in response to the questionnaire. An independent-sample t-test conducted to compare teachers' (M= 2.74, SD= 0.74) and students' (M= 3.04, SD= 0.75) perspectives on explicit grammar instruction revealed that there was no significant difference between the perspectives of those groups, $t(37)=1.08$, $p > .05$. Another independent-samples t-test conducted to compare teachers' (M= 2.54, SD= 0.79) and students' (M= 2.68, SD= 0.76) perspectives on implicit grammar instruction showed that there was no significant difference between preference of these groups either, $t(37) =0.49$, $p > .05$.

Although the statistical information indicates no significant difference between students' and teachers' perspectives on implicit and explicit grammar instructions, further investigation is needed to conduct a more comprehensive analysis. By identifying the most and least favored items within each group for each grammar instruction, a comparative analysis can be conducted between the two groups. Additionally, the written reports provided by students and teachers will be examined to determine if their explanations effectively justify their choices.

Regarding explicit grammar instruction, as displayed in Table 2, item 17 ("I think memorizing the grammar rules and structures helps me understand and use the grammar better") ranked first among students, followed by item 9 ("I need my teacher to draw my attention to grammar rules so I can notice what grammar is exactly being taught in the grammar class"). With regard to item 9, which emphasizes awareness, one student mentioned the necessity of being aware of grammar rules, while two other students associated this concept with making a strong first impression, stating that students should understand the rules and structures from the beginning. Two additional students emphasized the importance of awareness by stating that a lack of awareness of what is being taught might hinder learning. Two other students expressed that a



lack of knowledge of grammar rules would confuse them. As for item 17, only one student stated that memorizing rules and structures helps him/her with writing skills. Although only one student referred to memorizing rules and structures in the open-ended question, it can be seen from most of the students' explanations that, in general, grammar rules and structures are essential for students. For example, one student stated that rules could help him do better in exams. Another student mentioned that knowing the grammar rules helps students recognize the right and wrong grammar structures. Regarding language skills, a couple of students mentioned that grammar rules are important in their writing, speaking, and reading skills.

According to the data presented in Table 2, students ranked memorizing grammar rules as the highest-scoring item, whereas, among teachers, it received one of the lowest ratings, with a mean of 2.2 out of 4. Notably, teachers did not provide any information regarding the memorization of grammar rules in the open-ended question. While this item did not receive the highest score in terms of awareness, the mean of 3 out of 4 suggests that teachers also recognize the potential importance of awareness in grammar instruction. The most favored item among teachers was item 8, which states that teachers should supply learners with information about the underlying grammar rules of the input. This finding aligns with the written reports provided by teachers. For instance, one teacher mentioned, "If students know grammar structures and parts of speech, it facilitates their understanding of meaning and usage," while another teacher equated grammar with mathematics in their response.

Regarding implicit grammar instruction, item 4 in the students' survey and item 10 in the teachers' survey highlight the importance of focusing on meaning and communication in grammar lessons, receiving the highest scores. It is noteworthy that item 13 in the teachers' survey, which pertains to students' confidence, was also ranked first with the same mean. One possible explanation for the emphasis placed by both groups on meaning and communication in grammar classes is the prevalent use of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method at INTO Colorado State University, where the survey was conducted. Both students and teachers believe that understanding the meaning and facilitating communication is more crucial than solely focusing on forms and structure in grammar class.

Table 2. Mean of Each Item for Both Implicit and Explicit Grammar Instructions for Both Groups

Student explicit items	Mean of items (out of 4)	Student implicit items	Mean of items (out of 4)	Teacher explicit items	Mean of items (out of 4)	Teacher implicit items	Mean of items (out of 4)
1	3.137	2	2.827	1	2.1	9	3
3	2.896	4	3.034	2	2.4	10	2.9
5	2.862	6	2.689	8	3.5	3	2.3
7	3.137	8	2.965	4	2.5	11	2
9	3.275	10	2.344	15	3	5	2.6
11	3.172	12	2.758	6	3.3	12	2
13	2.586	14	2.689	7	3.1	13	2.9
15	2.965	16	2.827	16	2.6	18	2.6

17	3.344	18	2.034	14	2.2	17	2.6
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* The items for both grammar instructions and both groups in each row focus on the same topic.

4. Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, several implications can be drawn regarding the perspectives of teachers and students on implicit and explicit grammar instructions. Although no significant difference was observed between teachers' and students' viewpoints on these instructional approaches, analyzing the questionnaire items yielded interesting insights. With regard to explicit grammar instruction, students ranked 'memorizing grammar rules' and 'awareness' as their top priorities, as supported by some of the written reports in the open-ended question. On the other hand, teachers rated 'memorizing grammar rules' as the least important, while recognizing the significance of 'awareness.' Teachers indicated that 'providing grammar rules' was of utmost importance, which was substantiated by the written reports provided. Additionally, both groups emphasized the importance of meaning and communication over forms and structure in grammar classes.

Pedagogical Implications based on the results of the study

The results of the study provide some pedagogical implications, especially for teachers at INTO CSU. Since there is no significant difference between implicit and explicit grammar instruction among teachers and students, teachers could use both methods in their grammar classes. However, teachers must remember that students emphasize memorizing grammar rules and learn better when conscious of what is being taught. Nassaji & Fotos (2011) suggest some activities that promote learners' awareness of the grammatical forms of the target language along with engaging them in communicative interaction:

- “Noticing” tasks (i.e., learners are asked to notice and underline grammatical aspects in texts)
- “Consciousness-raising” tasks (i.e., learners complete a task to discover how the target language structure works by analyzing texts)
- “Checking” tasks (i.e., learners are asked to complete an activity to check if they have understood how the structure of the target language works)

Additionally, with both groups emphasizing the significance of meaningful communication, teachers should actively incorporate communicative approaches that provide students with ample opportunities to practice and apply grammar concepts. Chang (2017) suggests five methods to make grammar activities more communicative in grammar lessons: games, natural contexts, activities that balance skills, personalization, and adjustment of teachers' roles. As for games, he suggested some board games such as Monopoly and Snakes and Ladders, where students practice forms unconsciously through communication. To illustrate natural context, he provides one example where students are given two pictures of one city and asked to compare changes that happened using the present perfect. For activities that balance skills, he suggests information gap activities where students help one another to complete the missing information. Therefore, learners need to ask and find the information (by speaking) to fill out the blanks within a table, map, or paragraph. Regarding personalization, he states that to address specific students' needs and interests, adaptation and personalization of textbooks are necessary. He suggests role plays where students make some changes to personalize textbook conversations.



5. Limitations of this research

While this research was conducted carefully and systematically, certain areas could have been improved for further accuracy and depth. First, regarding the open-ended section in the questionnaire, participants were given the option of either implicit or explicit grammar instruction. However, it was observed that in some cases, teachers and students selected both methods despite being instructed to choose only one. This limitation resulted in excluding these responses, limiting the utilization of these data points to justify the descriptive statistics. Second, a larger volume of information from students in the open-ended section of the questionnaire would have been valuable. Incorporating interviews with students and encouraging them to provide more detailed reasoning could have provided additional insights into their choices. It is essential to acknowledge these limitations as they impact the comprehensiveness of the findings and suggest areas for future research to address these concerns.

Acknowledgment: I extend my sincere appreciation to Dr. Anthony Becker for his valuable guidance and advice throughout this research. I would also like to thank the instructors at INTO Colorado State University who kindly participated in the questionnaire, as well as the instructor of the level 3 class for allowing me to involve their students in this study. Furthermore, I am grateful to my students and all the other students at INTO Colorado State University who graciously agreed to participate in the questionnaire. Their insights and responses were integral to this study and greatly enriched its findings.

Conflict of Interest: In this study, potential conflicts of interest were carefully managed. Students were informed that their responses wouldn't affect their grades and that the questions didn't align with the author's personal preferences or the subjects taught. Incentives were offered to encourage genuine responses, such as a potential increase in achievement scores. For the other group, incentives came in the form of a promise to buy pizzas for the class to foster participation. Similarly, teachers' responses bore no impact on their career progression, addressing any potential conflict transparently and ensuring fair treatment of all participants.

Funding: No external funding was received for this research as it was conducted during the author's graduate studies and did not involve external grants, sponsorships, or financial support.

Ethical statements: This research was conducted with the ethical approval of INTO Colorado State University. Before the study, all participants were informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary, and no repercussions would arise should they decline to participate. Additionally, participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and any personal information such as their cultural background, with the explicit disclosure that no names or personal identifiers would be included in the research paper. This commitment to anonymity extended to all participants, including students and instructors who contributed to the study. Written consent was obtained and each individual's right to privacy was protected throughout



the study. These ethical standards align with the principles of voluntary and confidential participation, maintaining integrity and respect for the individuals involved.

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