

Implicit vs. Explicit Second Language Instruction: Concept and Paradigm

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Abstract

The communicative approach in foreign language instruction arguably is supposed to approximate a real-world setting to certain extent; but, it all too often falls short of providing a realistic context for the language to be used in all its possible variations. The fact that languages are dynamic and change is rarely recognized outside of the classroom due to the static nature of texts and pre-conceived syllabi employed. Likewise, the kinds of contrastive and overly explicit teaching methods employed by many instructors simplify the complexity of a daily language transaction or real-world experience too much. If language learning is to be internalized through any kind of implicit approach, the implicit nature of teaching must come from the fact that the internal processing mechanisms operate from the input taken directly from the environment and are not directly dependent on the learner's personal attempts to produce the language themselves. This means that explicit instruction methods must be combined so that speech habits may be formalized to take advantage of these initial efforts to provide a foundation for the kind of "strategies-based" instruction to be performed. Instructors may direct language learner's to employ the strategies they are taught to overcome the speech difficulties and cultural misunderstanding that are part of using a foreign language outside your own culture.

Key Words: Creative construction model, explicit instruction, form-focused instruction, implicit instruction, second language acquisition, skill learning model

1. Introduction

A major issue in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) regards what role Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) should play when teaching a language. FFI refers to an attention to the formal aspects of language (i.e., grammar, spelling, intonation, etc.) play during instruction. For years, SLA researchers have debated about whether or not to pay attention to linguistic form as it may or may not influence the implicit process of instruction. Some educators argue that second language acquisition is a fairly autonomous process that occurs spontaneously if instruction provides plentiful opportunities to deal with the target language, or explicit teaching of a set of grammatical rules for the given target language (Andringa, 2006). In other words, the implicit will take care of itself in much the same way native speakers rarely have to seek out grammar instruction in their own mother tongue.

In our opinion, the building up of speech habits in lieu of construction of an implicit linguistic system based solely on classroom or traditional instruction methods is not the best way to acquire / learn a foreign language. The application of past methodologies (i.e., grammar-translation, audio-lingual, and even the communicative method in common use today) falls short of the results offered by a more eclectic approach based on employing a selected gamut of learning strategies.

Despite the highly structured efforts of textbooks coupled with classroom instruction, modest efforts requiring significant expenditures of time benefit the learner less than a more unstructured exposure of the learner in a far more naturalistic language environment. Making friends, workplace exchanges, and travel encounters provide greater motivation than any classroom.

2. *Explicit vs. Implicit Second Language Instruction*

The communicative approach in foreign language instruction arguably approximates the social, professional, and simulated travel setting to certain extent, but it falls short of providing a realistic context for the language to be used in all its possible variations. The fact that languages are dynamic and change is rarely recognized outside of the classroom due to the static nature of texts and pre-conceived syllabi. Likewise, the kinds of contrastive teaching methods employed by most instructors overly simplify the complexity of a daily language transaction or real-world experience.

Our argument is based on both personal preference chosen and empirical data gathered as teaching professionals. In making the argument of implicit versus explicit language Instruction, it is best to first clarify the concepts of what is an implicit linguistic system is. The explicit instructional approach is evident in direct language instruction in a classroom setting. However, for implicit instruction to take place it is imperative to determine how speech habits are formed outside such a language-learning paradigm. The terms of implicit and explicit instruction are taken as part of an overall model of generalized foreign or second language learning.

Littlewood (1998) considers that there are in fact two implicit models of language instruction to be followed in the construction of an implicit language system. These models are referred to as the *Creative Construction Model* (CCM) and the *Skill Learning Model* (SLM). CCM is considered by these authors to be the most “influential” model to derive an explanation of how a foreign language learner may construct a series of internal representations of any foreign language system. A set of natural processing strategies may be utilized by the potential learner to approximate a reasonable exposure to given language learning situations. The learning takes place according to the rate at which a learner internalizes the representative elements of a language over a gradual period of time, in predictable stages of development, and in the direction of the learner’s competency level. This implicit model follows learning from the learner’s L1 to the learner’s first steps at trying to communicate in a meaningful way. It is wholly reliant on the “right kind of exposure” to be achieved for learning to take place (Littlewood, 1998:69).

CCM consists of four distinct parts, and may be represented as follows:

Input from Exposure → Internal Processing → System Construction → Spontaneous Utterances

The implicit nature of this model comes from the fact that the internal processing mechanisms operate from the input taken directly from the environment, and they are not directly dependent on the learner’s personal attempts to produce the language themselves.

CCM differs markedly from the second implicit model described by Littlewood (1998). The differences are chiefly found within the role attributed to the learner’s own attempts at producing the target language. CCM best exemplifies the cognitive processing strategies used to explain the obvious divide between acquisition and learner performance as it takes place.

The Skills Learning Model (SLM) is likewise implicit when compared to most of the current approaches to the teaching of a second language. Learning takes place in this manner according to another of Littlewood’s explanations of modelling structure:

Input from Instruction → Productive Activity → Learner Assimilation → Spontaneous Utterances

Lessons given using this implicit model of approach may use pre-determined and assumptive requirements in hopes of engaging students in all sorts of productive classroom behaviors that may (or may not) lead to language learning and acquisition. Content is supposed to be absorbed (assimilated) according to a pre-set understanding based on a “correct native speaker” response system which is externally imposed in a graded or a measured order. The native-like model approach is reliant on both cognitive and behavioral aspects of performance in which practice converts a planned syllabus into practical speech activity in a classroom setting. Naturally, the standard by which the native-like proficiency is subject to learned opinion in much the same way representative production is open to interpretation.

Both implicit models make similar assumptions about the implicit goal of second language learning. Each model uses a given set of “plans” or “rules” to create or impose language learning in an artificial setting (i.e. the classroom). The controlled environment of the classroom setting and the overall direction of the instruction are used to insure that students are given every possible opportunity and reason to learn the target language. The distinction between the usage pattern of the two described implicit models is the instructor’s belief as to whether or not foreign learning genuinely occurs through a conscious or an unconscious effort on the part of the learner. Further practical characterizations can be made in using these models and the “habit formation method” described in the second half of this argument. (Littlewood, 1998: 76) uses the terms “informal / formal”, “spontaneous / controlled”, and “natural/ didactic” to make such descriptions relevant to practitioners.

Most of the literature surveyed argues against making hard-and-fast statements to characterize the antithetical relationship between acquisition through learning and acquisition through a person’s innate abilities in a second language. Krashen (1981) considers that acquisition and learning feed into separate systems instead of using a single integrated framework to do the job. Each system performs a different function: learned systems “monitor” improvement in the correctness of a language – requiring sufficient time, without temporal constraints. Informal systems are acquired through exposure and their results are variable. (Stevick, 1980) argues that such a “Monitor Model” is inherently incorrect since his idea is that the two “systems of learning” do not remain separated, but in fact “bleed into one another”.

Littlewood (1998: 78) considers that the best way to integrate both forms of perceived foreign language learning processes is through the use of a broader learning model based almost entirely on “social learning”. In this less than implicit model Social Learning model (SLM), complimentary aspects of human development are to be taken into account rather than the sole consideration that a system based on rote learning imposed by implicit learning practices is efficient to learn a language, foreign or otherwise. Accordingly, SLM encompasses the following: (1) A motivation to learn; (2) an internal representation of behavioral features to be learned; (3.) practice in converting internal representation into actual language performance; and, (4.) feedback about the success of the resulting communication behavior.

The relationship between the two approaches, CCM and SLM, referred to by both Krashen and Stevick remains ill-defined in terms of the functions they perform and also to how they may contribute to overall language ability and learning. Such approaches implicitly try to divide both ability and process into equal parts, a near impossible activity to accomplish it might seem to us. The alternative consideration of this argument may be found in the introduction of an explicit form of foreign language instruction that hopes to form the same results, or better, as the promises of the implicit linguistic system found in a classroom setting. Implicit instruction in grammar and vocabulary are obviously superior to the explicit method which is haphazard or non-evaluative at best. However, the subjects of pronunciation and conversational discourse seem to remain resistant to the efforts of most instructional methods, and therefore remain solidly in the explicit realm.

However, there are those who remain unconvinced that learning a second language within a classroom setting is part of a student’s general development of core competencies. Krashen (1975) best illustrates this point of view by stating his “Monitor Model” which is a decidedly nativist, comprehension-based approach consisting of five separate hypotheses, each of which describe a different aspect of (SLA):

- 1.) The Acquisition Learning Hypothesis: communication vs. correctness.
- 2.) The Monitor Hypothesis: “Learned competence acts as a monitor or editor.
- 3.) The Natural-Order Hypothesis: Childhood SLA is superior to Adult efforts.
- 4.) The Input Hypothesis: Only comprehensible input results in SLA.
- 5.) The Affective Filter Hypothesis: Emotions excite / inhibit SLA.

This model has been highly criticized since its very introduction, and it is now considered as invalid to take part in this argument of implicit vs. explicit learning of a foreign language. Nevertheless, this model exemplifies any useful argument that tries to address the methodological gap found between the two forms of learning processes. Empirical research has been widely promoted to account for some or all of the variables found in theoretical SLA premises related to this subject. Flege, MacKay, & Piske (2002) contributed an evaluation of how bilingual dominance is affected in the “Critical Period (CP)”through implicit instruction.

Another study, this one supporting the implicit approach (Weber-Fox, & Neville, 1996), went further to consider how such implicit instruction of a learned vocabulary in Chinese-English bilinguals who had been exposed to English after puberty produced significantly higher performance competency through using only syntactic aspects of the language during instructional periods. Finally, it should be noted that a detailed summary of SLA research findings related to implicit vs. explicit learning methodologies in the classroom may be found in Horwitz (1985).

Not surprisingly, there are some people who feel that some languages may even defy the process of instructors being able to successfully construct an implicit linguistic system that may accommodate second language acquisition. It should be noted, “Analytic languages (for example, *Mandarin Chinese*) are easier to learn than synthetic (for example, *Finnish*)” (Bauer, & Trudgill, 1998:56). This means that it is actually easier to speak and significantly harder to acquire the grammar of a particular language, despite the fact that simplicity in one part of a language may balance or lead to the complexity of another part of that same language during the process of learning. Anyone studying German soon realizes that the initially comfortable speaking part soon gives way to the complex regions of reading and writing regular German.

Kasper and Rose (2002) provide a review of literature relating to this complex relationship between implicit classroom instruction and the kind of instruction which leads learners to practice outside the confines of the classroom in their pursuit of language proficiency. Activities and techniques which are so much a part of the “strategies-based” approach are presented to activate language as a seemingly “out-of-class” learning experience which focuses on the creation of extra-curricular opportunities to practice the target language. Further studies of the effectiveness of how a “strategies-based” approach promotes independent learning and self-study can be found in Pemberton, et al (1996) and Miller (1996).

3. Conclusion

Language aptitude research is most often criticized as being out of touch or even irrelevant to foreign language learner acquisition (SLA-Wiki-Online, 2006). Research findings seem largely interchangeable and testing methods remain as the greatest target for criticism because the content of the lesson is de-contextualized rather than being taken from normal daily conversational settings. The explicit form of SLA instruction is prevalent in most classrooms since it is easily accessible through textbooks, videos, and student limited expectations.

If a language learner is ever to build new language habits to supplement or to replace the old ones, then the question of how this is to be accomplished inevitably arises. Communicative competence, according to Lightbrown, & Spada (2006) is of such importance to successful language learning that it has given rise to a form of “strategy” approach, which is divided into the “learning” and “communication” roles prevalent found squarely in the implicit approach. Thus the synthesis or integration of the two approaches seems to have been theoretically accomplished.

Learning strategies are the techniques adopted or adapted to the learning of a foreign language that promote understanding or facilitate second language learning. They improve upon the communicative approach by focusing the learner’s energies on specific tasks that allow for access to the language or correction of mistakes in a real context. Oxford (1990; 1992) has demonstrated that different cultures, and even the two genders, often use different strategies and different ways to complete the language-learning process. Language learning is ultimately seen as a form of socialization in which learners take on the forms, habits, and even the cultural behavior of the target language community in order to gain acceptance, assimilation, and broad personal understanding through real communication.

The argument presented in this paper directs the reader to believe that an implicit linguistic system is best learned in a classroom setting. The explicit process takes place as a matter of practicality, resource limitations, and in the reinforcement of established language boundaries. That sort of environment has a measure of constraint to the extent that such aspects as time, artificiality, and affect are controlled in part or in whole by the instructor. The lessons that are presented are all-too-often taken out of context or may serve to be approximate of the target language in some form.

Our counter-claim to this argument is that the intrinsic learning process of a foreign language is not without value. The grammar and discourse methods built upon in the classroom may lead the learner towards, language acquisition success in a real setting if the lessons are internalized, as presented in the two implicit models of “Creative Construction” and “Skills Learning” (Littlewood, 1998).

Additionally, it must be remembered that the audio-lingual method (ALM) is particularly effective in the development of habits through the procedures involving classroom repetition and drilling. "It (SLM) has had the greatest impact of all of modern teaching methods on the teaching of languages" (Nunan, 1999:77) Speech habits may be formalized to take advantage of these initial efforts to provide a foundation for the kind of "strategies-based" instruction to be performed. Instructors direct language learner's to employ the strategies they are taught to overcome the speech difficulties and cultural misunderstanding that are part of using a foreign language outside your own culture. In the end, nothing can replace the real setting of second language acquisition to take place.

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