

Is explicit grammar teaching unnecessary in F/SL acquisition?

Apakah explicit teaching penting dalam pemerolehan bahasa asing/bahasa kedua?

Ali Murtopo¹⁾

*¹⁾Dosen Bahasa Inggris Politeknik Negeri Lampung
Jl. Soekarno Hatta Rajabasa Bandar Lampung*

Abstract

Metode pengajaran bahasa asing yang dikembangkan beberapa dasawarya terakhir menempatkan tata bahasa pada posisi marginal. Tata bahasa tidak lagi menempati posisi sentral seperti pada awal perkembangan metode pengajaran bahasa asing. Ada pandangan yang menyatakan bahwa tata bahasa hanya perlu diajarkan sesekali dan bahkan ada paradigma yang menyatakan bahwa tata bahasa sama sekali tidak perlu lagi diajarkan secara eksplisit. Artinya, pembelajaran bahasa asing diyakini akan tetap berhasil dengan baik walaupun tanpa melibatkan pembelajaran tata bahasa. Sehingga tata bahasa tidak mendapat porsi pengajaran sama sekali. Paradigma tersebut mengejawantah dalam metode pengajaran seperti CLT atau TBLT dan mendapat dukungan luas dari para praktisi pengajaran bahasa asing. Meskipun demikian, paradigma tersebut perlu ditinjau ulang karena banyak hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pengajaran tata bahasa memberikan hasil yang positif bagi penguasaan bahasa asing. Oleh karena itu, pengajaran tata bahasa tetap perlu dilaksanakan, namun harus dengan mengacu pada cara-cara pengajaran yang benar.

Kata kunci: tata bahasa, eksplisit, implisit

Introduction

Grammar has long been on the spotlight in the field of SLA and considerable debate about it seems far from reaching a shared agreement. The debate revolves around, but not limited to, one of the essential issues of whether it needs to receive a prioritized treatment in the foreign or second language teaching. Different methodologies to language teaching have posited different views and taken distinctive stance toward the teaching of it in the light of assumptions of successful

language learning. A teaching method with a particular assumption of successful language learning would obviously treat grammar in accordance with that assumption. It can be easily understood, then, that a teaching method established with a belief that learning a language should start with mastery of its grammatical structures would emphasize grammar teaching in the first place. On the contrary, a method built on an underlying belief that language learning should aim at

achieving developed communicative competence clearly focuses more on delivering meaning rather than understanding forms. In other words, a method which deems spoken form is of primary importance in language teaching clearly puts a little, or even none, emphasis to grammar explanation.

The change on views of grammar has been clearly seen in the recent trend in teaching methodology innovation. In such early teaching method as GTM (Grammar Translation Method) grammar receives a great deal of attention. Successful learning is supposed to take place when grammar has been acquired before any other aspects. With such assumption, GTM, as its name implies, puts a heavy emphasis on discussing grammar in its entire teaching activities with translation serving as its main tool. Later methods like CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) and TBLT (Task-based Language Teaching) have shown rejection toward this method as it has been considered as a failure. The methods suggest that grammar should not be the main focus of language learning; it can be learnt through, or incorporated into, any communicative activities and there should be no explanation to the students. Such view has caused the explicit grammar teaching to wane and communication has been given more emphasis in the teaching practice (for an overview of various teaching methods, see Cook (2008)).

The exclusion of explicit grammar in such teaching methods may largely stem from theoretical beliefs emerging in the past few decades. One example of the beliefs states that

L2 learning should more or less resemble L1 acquisition (Krashen, 1981). L1 learners never learn the language studiously. Grammar is never discussed and explained, yet the L1 learners can successfully acquire the language. A belief like this puts forward that grammar teaching is unnecessary and proposes that language use should prevail. CLT and TBLT obviously rest on such belief: successful language learning takes place when learners are actively engaged with language use in meaningful communication. With the emergence of the meaning-based approach where communication-oriented teaching making its way to prominence, explicit grammar teaching has recently been downplayed in the FL classrooms.

So, should explicit grammar teaching be totally abandoned? Is F/SL best acquired in the absence of explicit grammar teaching? Is explicit grammar teaching less facilitative than naturalistic approach where learners are not exposed to grammar explanation?

Presentation of this paper

General discussion over explicit teaching in this paper revolves around Krashen's Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis and its underlying assumptions in the context of Foreign Language acquisition. Firstly, this paper presents brief description on the hypothesis and related hypotheses to build up an overview for subsequent discussion. Not all hypotheses are thoroughly examined, though. Secondly, some opposing views which support explicit grammar teaching are brought forward. Thirdly, discussion is presented by contesting both views. Finally, conclusion and

suggestion are provided for further consideration in the teaching practice.

Arguments against explicit grammar teaching

There has been a great deal of strong argument against the notion of explicit grammar teaching in SLA. Strong opposition has been much instigated by Krashen's (1982) learning-acquisition hypothesis unequivocally distinguishing explicit learning from implicit form of language acquisition. The two types of processes, as this hypothesis claims, have two strikingly different routes to acquiring FL. Explicit learning refers to that of intentional and attentive focus to language rules while implicit learning constitutes a process where learners are engaged with language use without consciously studying the language rules. Explicit learning is deemed to deviate learners away from native mastery of FL and will merely lead to conscious understanding of language. The explicit knowledge works only as a monitor to check and edit language use in one's mind before being produced and cannot be transformed into implicit competence, i.e. automatic use of unconsciously acquired knowledge in language production. On the contrary, implicit learning is believed to provide an ideal condition which enables learners to acquire the FL. In this type of learning, learners are exposed to the natural target language use without being directed to pay attention to language rules which learners would unconsciously gain by inducing them from the input available. In this mode, learners would not know what the rules of FL are, yet

they can use them automatically when they need them.

The learning-acquisition hypothesis does not stand alone. It is closely inter-related to four other hypotheses in that it brought forward principles which underpin the other hypotheses on how language learning and acquisition work. The first is called the Natural Order Hypothesis which claims that learners acquire language in natural order, i.e. certain rules are acquired earlier than others. This means that some rules which shall be acquired later cannot be put forward and acquired early, even by explicit teaching. The second is Monitor Hypothesis which states that language production comes from acquired competence, while learnt rules cannot be converted into automatic competence. The learned rules just function as monitor or editor for any utterance before being actually produced. The third is Input Hypothesis which claims that acquisition can only occur when learners are exposed to comprehensible input, not by consciously taught the language. The fourth is Affective Filter Hypothesis which states that psychological factors, such as anxiety, prevent comprehensible input from being processed to be acquired.

Arguments in support of explicit grammar teaching

Whilst Krashen's hypotheses may be claimed to apply to the acquisition of L1 grammar, it has been met with scepticism to be valid for the acquisition of L2 grammar. Some research has suggested that learning a language requires somehow explicit factors which ensure that acquisition occurs more than just through

implicit encounters with the input. Implicit encounters with the input need to be engaged with attention (Doughty, 1991; Schmidt, 1990) in order to be processed and acquired. Needless to say, according to the researchers, comprehensible input would not be acquired in the absence of attention. Yet, the quality and quantity of the attention is of no less importance for the processing of the input as it influence efficient usage of the input (Logan, 1988). Moreover, another important factor to assist input processing is noticing which serves as facilitator to turn input into intake (Truscott, 1998). Thus, language learning would not take place successfully without the presence of the explicit components.

Discussion

The hypothetical distinction of the explicit and implicit knowledge entails enormous consequence in teaching practice; it sets out radical view of excluding grammar explanation from the classroom in that it is considered as not playing an important role in acquiring the FL. Its claim that explicit knowledge of language would not be likely transformed into automatic use as the natural implicit acquired knowledge of the language would (Krashen, 1982) negates the role of explicit instruction in the classroom. Teachers are therefore constrained from giving grammar explanation. As such, teachers are not supposed to direct learners' attention to particular feature of FL. This proposition may potentially slow down to the learner's attainment of language learning in that learners become unaware of specific point of language system they need to acquire. Hence learners

miss out a necessary tool to develop their language competence. As Doughty (1991) points out, attention to forms by analysing or highlighting certain structures in context promotes acquisition of interlanguage grammar. Focusing attention to components of language features makes the structures more salient and redundant that helps learners to more effectively acquire them.

Even if the effect of attention on acquisition is also under influence of comprehension of input, Doughty's finding suggests that attention to specific component of structures shed light on the importance of explicit instruction. Not only does this help learners acquire FL more effectively, it also increases the rate of acquisition. Instruction which offers explicit input provides immediate advantage to the learners' L2 development. As Harley (1989) reported, explicit input accelerates learners' grammar development. Even if the study does not prove that explicit input has a long-termed impact on L2 development, this shows that explicit grammar teaching does serve an important role in a way that it speeds up the process of FL acquisition which shall take more time in Krashen's input hypothesis with its full reliance on comprehensible input as prerequisite for successful acquisition.

While comprehensible input might become essential part for L2 acquisition, its only presence is not sufficient to enable L2 development. As noted, according to input hypothesis, successful acquisition of FL can only take place when learners are fully exposed to implicit input available to them

without deliberately notifying explicit input through explicit teaching. In other words, acquiring a second language is not about consciously learning language features such as grammar deliberately; instead L2 acquisition should rest on natural exposure to the target language. In this sense, learners should only remain passive by only receiving input supplied to them and cannot actively push themselves to process the input. Being passive means that learners do not need to attend any particular feature of language. If learners do not pay any explicit attention to particular feature of the language, they will not be able to acquire that feature. As consequence, acquisition process might be hampered and difficult to progress because explicit attention is needed for successful learning process. This is the case now that explicit attention is a necessary and sufficient condition for converting input to intake (Schmidt, 1990). Not only is the presence of attention necessary for encoding input into long-term intake, but also the quantity and quality of attention at the time of encoding the input determines efficient retrieval of the intake (Logan, 1988). Thus without attention, a very substantial prerequisite component for successful L2 acquisition, i.e. comprehensible input, as Krashen claims, cannot be processed to be acquired.

In addition, the nature of implicit learning is supposed to resemble the process of how children naturally acquire first language and as such requires ubiquitous comprehensible input. In such process, in order to achieve a successful degree of

competence in a FL, learners rely heavily on comprehensible input which should be available in large amount. If this is what shall happen to successfully acquire F/SL, in context of foreign language learning where comprehensible input is minimal, the implicit learning then does not allow quick process of FL acquisition. One shall wait for a very long period of time struggle before being capable of using the language. This is because the hypothesis believes that one cannot produce language utterance of particular feature before he acquires that feature from the input. As a result, implicit learning makes immediate use of language seem unlikely inasmuch as it fails to give positive effect in short term (Tode, 2007).

On the other hand, with explicit teaching in FL context where learners depend largely on the input available only in the classroom, the absence of sufficient comprehensible input may not substantially inhibit fast process of acquisition. Explicit teaching takes control to supply the input by consciously directing learners' attention to particular feature of the FL. In this way, teachers consciously notify learners about what the learners need to acquire. When learners notice the input supplied to them, they can take up the input. As Truscott (1998) points out, noticing to input serves as a necessary component for successful metalinguistic learning.

That very important component for successful acquisition does not only apply in the process of acquiring L2, but also seem to apply in the process of acquiring L1. Through

experiential observation in day-to-day life, it can be seen that when children are trying to comprehend input supplied to them, they actually notice the input. Their attention is directed by adults who notify them with a particular input. Adults usually assist and attract children's attention to notice the input by, for example, making their words more salient, giving a louder and slower voice, and repeating some particular words. This is basically a conscious effort to teach children a certain language feature. Also, adults generally correct the children's utterance when they make mistakes and supply them with the correct ones. Then it can be argued that what the adults do is actually a representation of explicit teaching which consciously lead children to language features.

Thus, conclusion that children acquire L1 through unconscious process and supposition that L2 acquisition should also take place accordingly are somehow problematic. As aforementioned, in the process of acquiring L1 children are to some extent engaged in explicit learning. Children L1 successful acquisition does not entirely depend on exposure to comprehensible input, but involve a certain degree of explicit learning. They do not merely comprehend the input inasmuch as they also receive enhanced input which makes them pay attention and notice the input. Subsequently, by noticing they can process the input more quickly which leads to ability to immediately use the language. To put it in another way, explicit learning facilitates faster process of acquisition because, in short time, explicit learning gives

positive effect in acquiring a language (Tode, 2007) and immediate impact on accuracy (White et al., 1991).

Krashen's claim that accurate learned rules through explicit teaching cannot be transferred into implicit competence is apparently shaky and questionable. Though some research (Macaro and Masterman, 2006; Macrory and Stone, 2000; Ellis, 1984) has lent support to Krashen's claim that explicit grammar teaching does not direct learners to acquisition, complexity of research methods in the researches have made the outcome less convincing. Ellis's study, for example, which found that explicit instruction failed to facilitate young children's language development, only employed 3-hour teaching and a small number of participants. This small study may likely to come to less firm outcome in regard to the small amount of instruction and insufficient length of time for practice. Another research with bigger number of participants and longer term was carried out to see if short-intensive program of grammar teaching benefits acquisition (Macaro and Masterman, 2006). This study concludes that explicit grammar teaching indeed contributes in gains in explicit knowledge, but that does not lead to accuracy in production tasks. Although this study has been conducted over longer period of time for the whole program, the nature of short-intensive teaching for each form and the large number of different grammatical forms may inhibit the conclusion to be ascertained. Learners do not have enough time to practice each grammatical form and internalize the form through practice. In line

with this finding, longer study with few participants shows that no direct relationship between explicit knowledge and the ability to use the knowledge was discovered (Macrory and Stone, 2000). Though learners' automatic use of language features was met, it was thought of as a result of routine class activities, not as a result of acquisition process of knowledge. This study has negated the possibility that the automatic use of language is an indication that acquisition has taken place in a sense that the language features have been produced subconsciously.

More importantly, unlike Krashen's claim, the accurate use of a FL is not only storage of metalinguistic knowledge, but can actually be internalized to be implicit competence through continuous practice which serves as a driving force in converting explicit knowledge into acquired competence. It is of great potential power that practice and use for a long time facilitates conversion of knowledge into competence. A research finds that long time practice of grammar knowledge leads to acquisition of the grammar (Scheffler and Cinciała, 2011). In the research, students of intermediate level who have been learning FL through explicit teaching were engaged in topical interviews to find out if they could both spontaneously produce correct grammar utterance and later on explain what they know about the grammar. The result was convincing; they could successfully do both. Even though the study does not reveal whether or not the students, as Krashen insists, correct and edit their intended utterance before actually being spoken, spontaneously and correctly

grammatical utterance produced by the students and their knowledge about them indicate that continuous practice guided by explicit knowledge converts explicit into implicit competence in a certain period of time.

Another study also discovered that practice tasks do bring about changes in learners' L2 development, meaning that grammar instruction has a lasting effect on the learners' competence (Spada and Lightbown, 1993). The study may have given an excessive exercise by employing "monitored" tasks while learners were consciously directed to focus on interrogative forms. Furthermore, on a limited occasion, prompts were also given to stimulate language production when the learners failed to produce spontaneous oral question. This treatment may lead to possibility that the learners overlearned the forms, rather than acquired them, and prompts may show incompetence, yet the result was conclusively strong. It was indicated by the fact that there was no evidence of hesitation, mental searching, or distraction for the most of the spontaneous production. Overall, that majority of the learners' language oral production was spontaneous has confirmed that explicit focus on form facilitates acquisition.

If the beneficial effect of explicit teaching which provides noticeable input is found not to be long lasting as competence (Tode, 2007; Macaro and Masterman, 2006; Macrory and Stone, 2000; Truscott, 1998), it most probably results from inadequacy of practice and use of the language features

supplied. Apart from the need of noticing the input, learners also need to be given enough chances to practice and use the learned rules so that they can internalize them to be implicit competence. Noticing cannot stand alone as an individual important component of acquiring the input. There should be another factor, i.e. practice, which complements its role to optimally process and fully internalize the input to be competence. They both should not be separated from each other and should instead be integrated as a driving force for successful acquisition in that they work cooperatively toward the same goal; noticing assists processing the input (Marand and Dasgoshadeh, 2011) and practice in a consistent environment increases the amount of input retrieved and speeds up the retrieval of the input (Logan, 1988). As Ellis (2005) notes “formulas, slot-and-frame patterns, drills, and declarative pedagogical grammar rules all contribute to the conscious creation of utterances whose subsequent usage promotes implicit learning and proceduralization”. In short, when learners consciously notice the input and then practice the input into actual use, they undergo the process of automatizing explicit knowledge into implicit.

Conclusion and suggestion

This paper does not suggest that Krashen’s hypotheses are of total failure and is not intended to totally dismiss them. This paper does not discuss how and when input hypothesis works best either and therefore does not suggest abandoning it at all in the process of L2 learning. Instead, it merely expresses reservation on comprehensible input

as a sole factor for successful SLA by showing some pitfall of the hypothesis. Comprehensible input, as Krashen claims, may play an essential part in successful SLA, yet this is not sufficient to achieve a complete L2 competence now that some aspects of a language are not fully acquired through comprehensible input, i.e. there are occasions where comprehensible input does not do the entire job. Immediate ability to use the foreign language is an example of such explicit teaching advantage which comprehensible input misses.

Therefore, as acquisition does not wholly rely on comprehensible input, different components should be in place to ensure that L2 development progresses more smoothly and thoroughly. Such those components as attention, noticing, and practice indeed contributes to SLA. Many other discussions, however, are needed to find out how, when, and how much those factors should be present in L2 learning.

Therefore, to achieve an optimal result of explicit teaching-learning process that facilitates smooth and successful acquisition of the F/SL, it is recommended that teachers need to:

1. provide the students with sufficient comprehensible input to ensure that they have enough raw materials to consume and process.
2. explicitly attract the students’ conscious attention to the target features the teachers wants the students to acquire.

3. direct students' explicit focus to particular feature so that they afford to notice the feature.
4. design learning activities in one way or another that enable the students to

retrieve the acquired features into usage.

5. Grant the students sufficient opportunity to promote their learned language into implicit competence through a great deal of practice.

References

- Cook, V. (2008) *Second Language Learning and Language Teaching*. 4 ed London: Hodder Education.
- Doughty, C. (1991) 'Second Language Instruction Does Make a Difference', *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 13, (04), pp. 431-469.
- Ellis, N. C. (2005) 'At The Interface: Dynamic Interactions Of Explicit And Implicit Language Knowledge', *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 27, (02), pp. 305-352.
- Ellis, R. O. D. (1984) 'Can Syntax be Taught? A Study of the Effects of Formal Instruction on the Acquisition of WH Questions by Children', *Applied Linguistics*, 5, (2), pp. 138-155.
- Harley, B. (1989) 'Functional Grammar in French Immersion: A Classroom Experiment', *Applied Linguistics*, 10, (3), pp. 331-360.
- Krashen, S. D. (1981) 'The 'fundamental pedagogical principle in second language teaching' ', *Studia Linguistica*, 35, (1-2), pp. 50-70.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982) 'Principles and practice in second language acquisition', in Oxford; New York: Pergamon.
- Logan, G. D. (1988) 'Toward an instance theory of automatization', *Psychological Review*, 95, (4), pp. 35.
- Macaro, E. and Masterman, L. (2006) 'Does intensive explicit grammar instruction make all the difference?', *Language Teaching Research*, 10, (3), pp. 297-327.
- Macrory, G. and Stone, V. (2000) 'Pupil progress in the acquisition of the perfect tense in French: the relationship between knowledge and use', *Language Teaching Research*, 4, (1), pp. 55-82.
- Marand, E. S. and Dasgoshadeh, A. (2011) 'Teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching', *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 23, (1), pp. 53-60.
- Scheffler, P. and Cinciala, M. (2011) 'Explicit grammar rules and L2 acquisition', *ELT Journal*, 65, (1), pp. 13-23.
- Schmidt, R. W. (1990) 'The Role of Consciousness in Second Language Learning', *Applied Linguistics*, 11, (2), pp. 129-158.
- Spada, N. and Lightbown, P. M. (1993) 'Instruction and the Development of Questions in L2 Classrooms', *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 15, (02), pp. 205-224.
- Tode, T. (2007) 'Durability problems with explicit instruction in an EFL context: the learning of the English copula be before and after the introduction of the auxiliary be', *Language Teaching Research*, 11, (1), pp. 11-30.
- Truscott, J. (1998) 'Noticing in second language acquisition: a critical review', *Second Language Research*, 14, (2), pp. 103-135.
- White, L., Spada, N., Lightbown, P. M. and Ranta, L. (1991) 'Input Enhancement and L2 Question Formation', *Applied Linguistics*, 12, (4), pp. 416-432.