

The effect of formal instruction as a function of rule complexity: An empirical study

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Although there is broad consensus among theorists and researchers that formal instruction is necessary if learners are ever expected not only to get their messages across but also do so in an accurate, appropriate and meaningful way, several issues remain controversial. One of these is the choice of grammatical structures to be taught, a decision that is not easily made if we consider the fact that learning difficulty can vary depending on whether our intervention aims to develop explicit knowledge, which can be consciously drawn upon when there is sufficient time, or implicit knowledge, which underlies spontaneous communication. In fact, several factors have been identified which help us predict the ease of grammatical structures becoming part of the two types of representation (e.g. Ellis 2006), and a number of studies have shown a link between the properties of the targeted form and the effectiveness of formal instruction (e.g. Williams and Evans 1998).

The paper reports the findings of a research project which contributes to this line of enquiry by investigating the effect of form-focused instruction on the acquisition of the English past simple tense and passive voice, grammar features which can be viewed as easy and complex, respectively. The study was pre-experimental in nature, employing a pretest and three posttests with an eye to exploring the immediate and long-term effect of the treatment, as well as measures of explicit and implicit knowledge in the form of a grammar test and a communicative task requiring the use of the targeted structures. There were six treatment sessions, in which the relatively implicit instructional techniques of input enhancement (i.e. typographical alterations), recasting (i.e. reformulations of learners' utterances which preserve the intended meaning) and output enhancement (i.e. clarification requests aimed at the target forms) were employed.

Quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data provided evidence that there is a link between the effectiveness of instruction and the complexity of the feature taught. The findings also indicate that the choice of instructional techniques should take into account the inherent properties of a particular form and its perceived status in the learners' explicit and implicit knowledge stores. Additionally, they point to the fact that caution should be exercised when interpreting the effects of any pedagogic intervention.