The natural approach to adult learning and teaching of grammar in a foreign language context

Paweł Scheffler (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland)

Learning a language in a natural way is normally understood to involve developing implicit knowledge of that language. The acquisition of such knowledge takes place through communication and is driven by learner-internal mechanisms which cannot be directly influenced by formal instruction (Krashen 1982). The role of formal instruction in foreign or second language (L2) learning is, then, to provide learners with access to comprehensible L2 input, opportunities for communication, and with assistance in those areas in which implicit learning is impossible or inefficient. One of the ways in which this can be achieved is through the use of unfocused tasks (e.g. Long & Robinson 1998, Ellis 2003, Willis & Willis 2007).

In this paper, I argue that in the case of adult foreign language learners the term "natural learning" should be interpreted as referring to explicit learning. The claim is based on the following premises:

adults possess a general problem-solving mechanism

the contribution that implicit induction can make to adult foreign language learning is limited

The use of a general problem-solving mechanism by adults in acquiring cognitive skills is well documented by empirical research (e.g. Anderson 2000). This research shows that cognitive skills are acquired in three stages: (1) the cognitive stage (development of explicit / declarative knowledge), (2) the associative stage (proceduralization of declarative knowledge), and (3) the autonomous stage (automatizing or fine-tuning procedural knowledge). Possessing an explicit knowledge of L2 rules can, thus, be seen as the first stage in developing an L2 ability.

As for implicit induction, there are two main reasons why the contribution it can make to adult foreign language learning can be seen as limited. First, as DeKeyser (2003: 319-21) points out, empirical research findings "must leave one very sceptical about the possibility of implicit learning of abstract structure, at least by adults." The only cases in which implicit learning may be effective appear to be those involving "concrete and contiguous elements." Second, the time constraints under which adult foreign language learners typically operate mean that those learners are unlikely to be able to employ their implicit learning mechanism to any significant degree.

Accepting the above arguments means that adult foreign language instruction should primarily aim to engage the learners' general problem-solving mechanism. This is best achieved by providing learners with explicit declarative rules about the target code, and then with opportunities for proceduralizing and automatizing those rules. I will argue that the implementation of adult L2 instruction should initially involve the structural syllabus, which can be replaced by task-oriented teaching as learners' L2 ability increases (cf. Marton 2003, Pawlak 2006). Drawing on Nunan's (2004) approach to task-based instruction, I will also demonstrate how focused tasks can be integrated into teaching along the lines of skill acquisition theory.

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