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The influence of explicit grammar instruction on the incidental acquisition of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation

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The study examined the incidental acquisition of three language features (grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) when the learners receiving explicit instruction focusing on a particular grammatical feature. The analyses for incidental acquisition showed significant gains for vocabulary (i.e., new vocabulary items) and pronunciation (i.e., stress placement) but not for the grammatical feature (i.e. passive voice). The results indicated that incidental acquisition takes place in the language classroom even when a particular linguistic form is explicitly taught. It was more evident for vocabulary and pronunciation than grammar. The most explicit instruction resulted in better incidental vocabulary acquisition. This might be because the explicit instruction plus highlighted text helped the learners with limited proficiency to comprehend the story, which allowed them to be more attentive to other aspects of language than the target structure.

Incidental acquisition Explicit instruction

The current study tries to answer two scientific, under-researched questions in the field of second language acquisition: whether explicit grammar instruction interferes with or enhances second language learners' incidental grammar acquisition, and whether individual learner differences mediate the incidental acquisition. Researchers (Ellis, 1997; Gass, 1997) have argued that second language learners need to develop ability to communicate through incidental learning but that explicit grammar instruction also assists in developing communicative language ability as it helps learners become able to monitor their own production, notice the gap between their production and appropriate linguistic forms (Swain, 1995) and attend to feedback learners receive. However, some researchers have contended that second language learners might be unable to effectively use their explicit knowledge in processing language due to limited processing ability (Skehan, 1996). VanPatten (1996, 2004) asserted that learners with low proficiency need the assistance of explicit instruction (called processing instruction) to process second language input effectively; thus, attending to linguistic form in input might prevent learners from 'picking up' other aspects of language to which they are exposed. However, little research has specifically addressed whether explicit instruction has any influence on learning other features to which the learner is exposed (i.e. incidental acquisition).

The purpose of the proposed research project is to explore the influence of explicit instruction on incidental acquisition (i.e. learning a language feature that is not targeted in the lesson) in a second language classroom. This is a poorly explored area; while the majority of studies in second language learning have focused on language features instructors teach directly, very few have investigated how incidental acquisition occurs in a classroom. The topic is of theoretical as well as pedagogical interest because much of the acquisition of a second language grammar must necessarily be incidental. Given the limits on any learner's capacity to learn the grammar of a language intentionally, learners must necessarily rely to a considerable extent on incidental learning. Investigating incidental acquisition in a second language classroom with different levels of explicitness is of both theoretical and pedagogical interest.

A total of 120 low-intermediate university students in Japan participated in this study. They were randomly divided into three experimental and one control groups. The experimental groups received four treatment sessions in which they received different levels of explicit instruction on the counterfactual conditional structure. In each treatment session, the +explicit instruction +input enhancement (+EI+IE) group completed a 10-minute explicit instruction (EI) and a 20-minute story retelling (SR) task. In the EI, the learners studied an EI sheet including the metalinguistic explanation of the target feature and some grammar exercises. The SR task involved the students to listen to a story including four counterfactual conditional sentences while looking at the script of the story

in which the four sentences were highlighted (i.e., +input enhancement). The +EI–IE group completed the same EI sheet and the SR task but the four target sentences were not highlighted in the script. The –EI–IE group only completed the story task with no highlighted sentences. The incidental acquisition was operationalised by embedding other language features. For grammatical feature, each story contained 10 past passive voice sentences. To test vocabulary acquisition, six unfamiliar vocabulary items were selected and embedded in the story. The acquisition was measured by three story re-telling task, which were different from the treatment tasks, as pre-, post- and delayed posttest. Two other tests were conducted as pretest and delayed posttest: Paribacht and Weshche's (1993) vocabulary knowledge scale (VKS) test and an error correction test measuring explicit knowledge of the past passive voice. The control group only completed the test without receiving any of the treatment lessons.

Different results were shown for the three language features. The three experimental groups showed significant improvement in the production of the vocabulary items in the story tasks and the scores on the VKS test. Furthermore, the group received the most explicit instruction (+EI+IE) showed better vocabulary learning than the other experimental groups. The all experimental groups showed significant improvement in their stress location although there were no significant group differences for this feature. None of the experimental groups showed significant gains for the past passive voice although the effect sizes indicated some improvements by the experimental groups. No group differences were found in the scores for the past passive voice. The results indicated that incidental acquisition takes place in the language classroom even when a particular linguistic form is explicitly taught. It was more evident for vocabulary and stress placement of words than grammar. The most explicit instruction resulted in better incidental vocabulary acquisition. This might be because the explicit instruction plus highlighted text helped the learners with limited proficiency to comprehend the story, which allowed them to be more attentive to other aspects of language than the target structure.

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Incidental acquisition of grammar and vocabulary in repeated text-reconstruction tasks.

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