

The Effect of Explicit Grammar Instruction on Language Learning

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Abstract

Explicit grammar instruction in the second language (L2) classroom is an increasingly important area that requires more research. Second language acquisition (SLA) researchers investigate the role of explicit grammar instruction and its impact on achievement. However, the findings are inconclusive. The present study, therefore, sets out to investigate the impact of teaching the target language grammar explicitly on the development of the target language competency in the hope of identifying the relevance of such explicit instruction.

The study employs positivist research paradigm. After conducting a pre-test, sixty learners learning English as a second language are selected and randomly assigned into two groups namely experimental and control groups. A grammar course is administered for four months to each group alike except that the experimental group learners are given basic instructions on form and function of grammatical item using their L1. The control group learners are taught the same grammatical items explicitly without using their L1. At the end of the course, a post-test is held to determine the improvements. Statistical analysis of improvement marks suggests that those experimental group learners who received instructions using their first language significantly improve and demonstrate the ability to use grammar in isolation, yet such instruction has not helped either group to improve their ability to use grammar in contextually appropriate ways. This does not necessarily mean that explicit grammar instruction is of no use, but this finding encourages us to more carefully plan the explicit grammar instruction lessons.

Keywords: explicit instruction, adult learners and beginner level learners

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Introduction

Second language (L2) learners generally acquire the target language in formal classroom contexts where explicit grammar instruction is often given. However, explicit grammar instruction in the second language classroom is an increasingly important area that requires more research. Some studies investigate the role of explicit grammar instruction and its impact on the achievement. However, the findings are inconclusive. Some researchers use the term *form focused* instruction whereas others use the term *isolated instruction* to refer to the same concept of explicit grammar instruction. This study uses the term *explicit grammar instruction* to refer to the teaching of grammatical rules in isolation as discrete grammar points and empirically examines the impact of using explicit grammar instruction on the development of the target language competency. The study was a part of a larger study that was conducted to investigate the impact of first language use on the development of the target language competency. However, it was surprising to find out that the use of explicit form-focused instruction given either in the target language itself or using a limited amount of the learners' mother tongue does not help the second language learner to develop the ability to use the target language in contextually appropriate ways. Hence, it appears that a discussion on the relevance of explicit grammar instruction in the beginner level adult classroom is timely and appropriate.

Background literature

According to some researchers, there are more advantages in the conditions associated with formal instruction. Learners, in particular, in the early stages of language learning tend to “fossilize” some grammatical inaccuracies (Canale and Swain,1980) and such errors appear to persist over time in spite of further language training. This seems to occur in contexts where grammatical accuracy is not adequately emphasized at the beginning. Those who support formal instruction further claim that adult learners can consciously learn about language rules and apply them when they use the language (Ellis,1985, 1997 and 2008, Lightbown,1985, Rutherford,1987, Spolsky,1989, Thornbury,1997, Parrott,2000 and Spada and Lightbown,2008). Ellis (1997) further points out that formal grammar instruction helps L2 learners to perform grammatical features that are already part of their implicit knowledge with increased accuracy and it also enables them to progress through developmental sequences more rapidly. Spada, Lightbown and White (1999) too argue that it is necessary to provide instruction that is explicit with regard to the L2. According to them, this conscious knowledge accelerates the acquisition of new language. Further, Spada and Lightbown (2008) claim that explicit instruction, in particular, helps learners who share the same first language to overcome problems related to L1 influence. According to Seliger (1979), grammar rules act as ‘acquisition facilitators.’ Larsen-Freeman (1985) is of the view that formal instruction does not significantly alter the acquisition sequences, but instruction may simplify learning tasks, speed up the rate of acquisition and improve the quality and level of ultimate L2 attainment. It can also be argued that learning may lead to acquisition provided that those learned rules are constantly practiced and used in different contexts. Kasper and Rose (2002) point out that explicit instruction along with ample practice opportunities results in the greatest gains. Dodson (1967) too claims that conscious knowledge of the patterns to be learned helps the student, in particular adult learner, because an adult who possesses a

greater logical thinking ability can make use of it to consciously learn and spontaneously use structures. Hawkins (1984) too suggests that raising awareness of language through explicit grammar instruction helps second language learners. Wilkins (1972) agrees with the fact that explicit explanation of language structures with older learners works. According to Cook (1991), even if the students and teachers have the goal of business communication in the second language or some other goal, they cannot escape from the fact that grammar is at the core of what they are doing and learning. Cowan (2008) too identifies that non-native teachers of English realize the benefits of knowing English grammar well. Similarly, Lyster (2004) claims that immersion students develop their strategic communication ability through negotiation of meaning, yet they demonstrate some weaknesses in terms of accuracy. The reason given by Lyster (2004) is the lack of form focused instruction. There is evidence from Sri Lankan context too in support of explicit form-focused instruction. For instance, Suraweera (2014) highlights the importance of incorporating planned form focused instruction in the language classroom. She further claims that form focused feedback helps the students to monitor their output, reflect on their mistakes and produce accurate structures in the future. Thus, research evidence supports the view that conscious acquisition of rules helps learners to use them spontaneously and more accurately at a later stage. Ellis (1997) calls it “Delayed Effect Hypothesis”.

In spite of the empirical support in the ELT literature, some researchers argue that explicit grammar instruction is of no use. For instance, Nunan (1991) and McLaughlin (1987), among others quote morpheme studies and claim that a universal order of acquisition exists. They, therefore, argue that the nature of the target language drives the acquisition process and instruction cannot change that natural order of acquisition. Similarly, Krashen (1985) argues that instructed teaching results in knowing about the language and as such consciously learned rules do not change into normal speech processes in the same way as rules acquired unconsciously. Most of these arguments seem to be based on the first language acquisition studies. However, it is important to remember that the second language learners are different from the first language learners. For instance, Flynn (1996), Doughty (2003,) Pennycook (1994), White (1996), Macaro (2000) and Cook (2011), among others, argue that the second language learners are already literate in a first language and therefore they are linguistically and cognitively capable of very different operations. Therefore, developing L2 theories on the basis of the L1 principles is questionable. More importantly, a very few empirical studies have been conducted, in particular, in the Sri Lankan context to explore the use of explicit grammar instruction and the impact of such use on the development of the target language competency. Also, the research findings on the impact of explicit grammar instruction are inconclusive. These reasons have led to the call for more empirical studies to examine the effects of explicit instruction on the target language achievement. The present study, therefore, sets out to examine the impact of using explicit grammar instruction in the second language classroom in the hope of prompting further discussion on the much debated issue of explicit grammar instruction and identifying implications for practice and policy with regard to explicit grammar instruction in the second language classroom. To test and validate the impact of the use of explicit grammar instruction in the adult L2 classroom at beginner’s level, the following research questions and research hypothesis were formulated.

Research hypothesis

The question that motivated the present study was:

"What is the impact of using explicit grammar instruction in the second language classroom to teach the target language to the beginner level adult learners?"

On the basis of this question, the following research hypothesis was tested:

H1: A beginner level adult L2 learner learning a target language using explicit grammar instruction given in the learners' first language (L1) is able to develop the target language more effectively.

The following null hypothesis was also tested:

H0: A beginner level adult L2 learner learning a target language using explicit grammar instruction given without using the learners' first language (L1) is able to develop the target language more effectively.

These hypotheses were tested using quantitative techniques as explained below.

Methodology

To investigate the impact of using explicit grammar instruction in adult second language classroom at beginner's level, this study used positivist research paradigm that involved quantitative techniques. An experiment that involved the manipulation of a treatment variable followed by observing the effects of this manipulation on the dependent variable was conducted to collect data. After obtaining the informed consent of the participants, a pre-test was given to hundred and sixty three learners studying humanities and social sciences related subjects in the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka. Of the 163, sixty participants were selected and randomly assigned into two groups namely experimental and control groups. This kind of random sampling enables the researcher to achieve necessary control of variables and ensure internal validity of the study (Mackey and Gass,2005, Dörnyei,2007, Ary, Jacobs and Sorensen,2010, and Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtle,2006). A test paper based on the language elements such as imperative forms, have/has to denote possession, modal auxiliaries, basic active voice and passive voice constructions was given and the students who obtained less than 40% for the said paper were considered beginners of English language learning. The grades these learners had obtained for English at two national exams namely G.C.E.(Ordinary Level) or G.C.E.(Advanced Level) also proved that those who were selected for the study were beginners of English language learning.

Participants of the study were homogenous in that variables such as their age, exposure to the target language, target language competency, native language competency and cognitive development were very much alike, because comparing the experimental group with the control group after treatment only makes sense if the groups are roughly equivalent at the start of the experiment (Mitchell and Jolley,1988 and Mackey and Gass,2005).

A special grammar course for 32 hours was designed and administered to each group alike except that the experimental group was given basic instructions on the form and function of selected grammatical items using a limited amount of learners' first language. Further, a few examples from each grammatical item along with their Sinhala translations were given to the experimental group learners. Same course was administered to the other 30 students in the control group. Here, explanations and examples were given in English only. At the end of the course, a post-test was held to assess the target language competency of each learner of the two groups. It should be noted here that the last test item of both pre- and post-tests was designed to test the learners' ability to use the selected grammatical items in contextually appropriate ways. Improvement of each learner was measured. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data and draw conclusions. Thus, a quantitative study utilizing experimental design was held to determine the impact of using explicit grammar instruction on the development of the target language competency.

Results and discussion

The statistical analysis of improvement marks using the Mann Whitney U test shows that there was a significant correlation between the type of instruction and achievement. The improvement shown by the experimental group learners who learned the target language grammatical items using their L1 in a limited manner is significantly better than the improvement shown by the control group learners who did not receive explanations in their first language. Raw data shown in the following table (Table 1) too confirms this finding.

Table 1

Subject	Experimental Group			Control Group			
	Instruction is given using a limited amount of learners' first language			Instruction is given without using the learners' first language			
	Pre-test	Post-test	Improvement	Pre-test	Post-test	Improvement	
1	40	51	11	31	68	37	
2	23	53	30	20	44	24	
3	32	61	29	22	49	27	
4	32	65	33	36	50	14	
5	24	49	25	27	51	24	
6	16	69	53	40	76	36	
7	27	39	12	39	73	34	
8	32	91	59	40	66	26	
9	25	64	39	29	49	20	
10	32	67	35	38	50	12	
11	39	64	25	32	76	44	
12	40	66	26	40	50	10	
13	28	69	41	39	52	13	
14	38	62	24	40	54	14	
15	37	66	29	40	59	19	
16	40	70	30	34	51	17	
17	25	45	20	35	48	13	
18	29	72	43	35	53	18	
19	33	68	35	37	56	19	
20	27	62	35	39	52	13	
21	14	71	57	39	58	19	
22	35	80	45	39	69	30	
23	40	79	39	31	58	27	
24	40	73	33	35	47	12	
25	36	68	32	25	44	19	
26	8	46	38	31	61	30	
27	38	63	25	38	64	26	
28	31	59	28	37	54	17	
29	38	71	33	40	69	29	
30	28	60	32	30	54	24	
Total of improvement marks			996				667
Median of improvement marks			32.5				19.5
Interquartile range of improvement marks			13				14

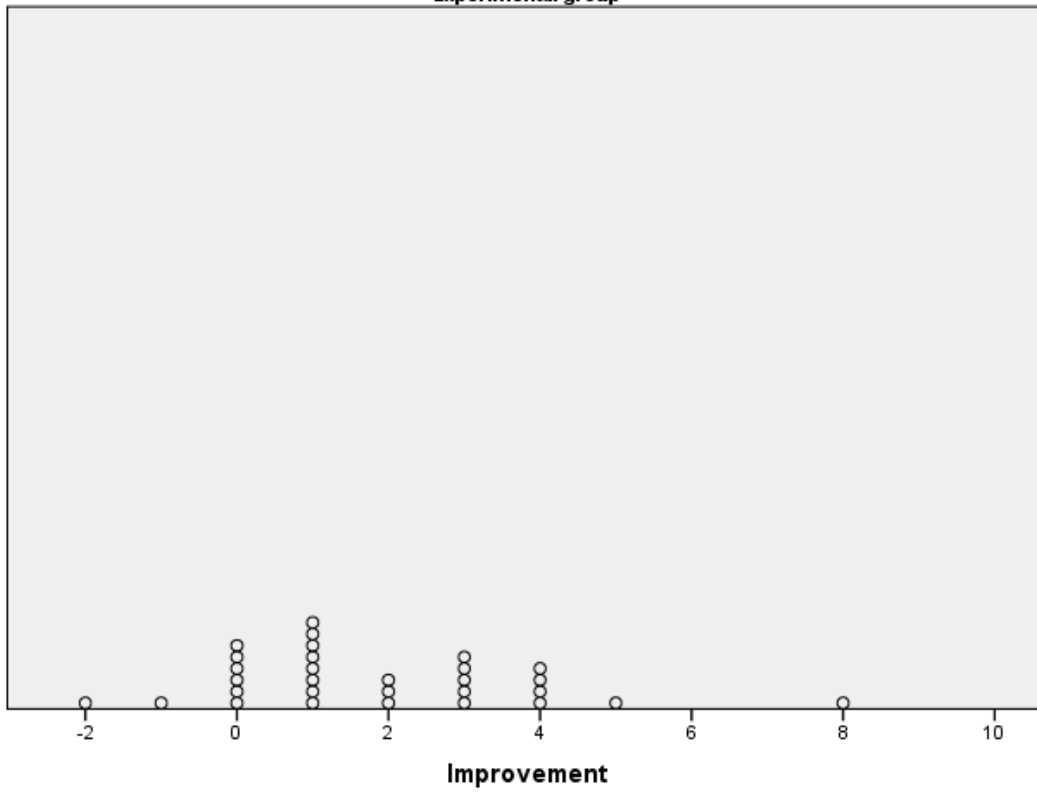
As shown in table one, the improvement marks of the control group is not normally distributed. Also, the data contains outliers or extreme values that are inconsistent with the rest of the dataset. They can have an undue impact on the outcome of the statistical data analysis. When the data are not normally distributed and contain outliers as found in this study, the median is a more robust measure of the centre of distribution, in that it is not as heavily influenced by outliers and skewed data. Therefore, this study compares the medians of improvement marks of the two groups using Mann Whitney U test , and not the T Test that is commonly used in the second language acquisition research, in order to find out if the difference of improvement marks of the two groups is statistically significant or not. Statistical analysis of data shows that a beginner level adult L2 learner learning a target language using explicit grammar instruction given in the learners' first language in a limited manner is able to develop the target language grammatical structures significantly better than the control group learners who learned the same set of grammatical items without using their first language. This finding supports the hypothesis of this study. The learners of the control group too, who learned the same grammatical items without using their first language appear to show 'some' gains (Table 1). These observed gains could be attributed to explicit instruction that they too received. Although Long (1988)

identifies the type of explicit explanation of grammar used in the study as “neanderthal teaching practices,” adult second language learners are cognitively and linguistically mature and form-focused explicit instruction helps them acquire the target language structures as Ellis (1985, 1997, 2008), Thornbury (1997), Parrott (2000) and Spada and Lightbown (2008), among others, suggest. However, there was a significant correlation between the type of instruction and achievement. Hence, the learners of the experimental group who learned the target language using explicit grammar instruction given in the learners’ first language is able to develop the target language grammatical structures significantly better than the control group learners who learned the same set grammatical items without using their first language.

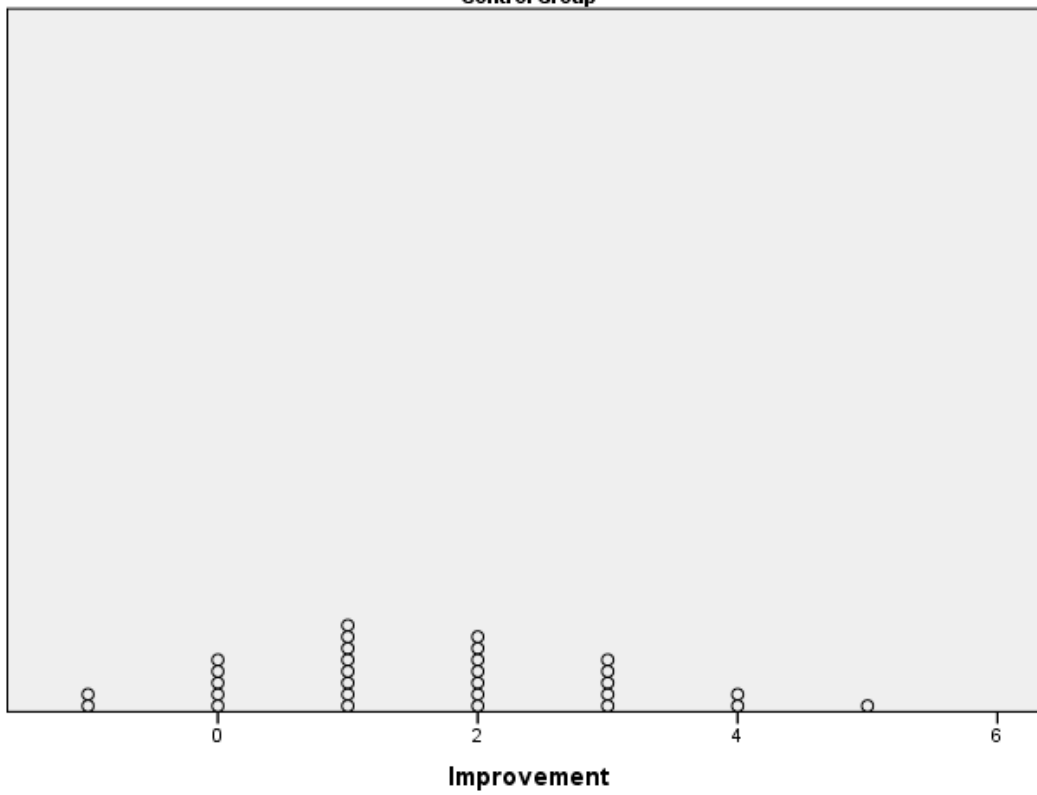
There appear to be several explanations for the significant improvement of the experimental group learners. Comprehensibility of instructions (Cook, 2010, Piasecka 1988, Cinamon, 1994 and Dodson, 1967), ‘noticing’ or conscious attention to rules of the target language (Schmidt, 1990 and 1993) and conducive learning environment created due to the use of learners’ first language (Auerbach, 1993, Pan and Pan, 2010 and El-dali, 2011) could be the reasons for the significant improvement of the experimental group learners who learned the target language using explicit grammar instruction given using the learners’ first language in a limited manner.

However, the learner performance of all test items is not equal. As discussed before, the learners of the experimental group who learned the target language grammar using their L1 in a limited manner have improved their ability to use grammar in isolation significantly better than the control group learners who learned the target language grammar without using their L1. Also, the learners of the control group have been able to develop their ability to use grammar in isolation to a certain extent. Yet, the research findings suggest that the use of explicit instruction to teach grammar in isolation has not helped beginner level adult L2 learners of either group to improve their ability to use grammar in contextually appropriate ways. This is clear when the improvement marks obtained by the learners of both groups for the grammar in context test item are concerned. As explained before, the last test item of both pre- and post-tests was designed to test the learners’ ability to use the selected grammatical items in contextually appropriate ways. Following xgraphs show that the average improvement mark obtained by most of the learners is less than 3 (out of 10) for the grammar in context test item. Further, despite four months instruction on grammar in isolation, 30% of learners in the experimental group and 17% of learners in the control group have not been able to improve their ability at all to use grammar in contextually appropriate ways. As a result, their improvement mark is zero. Furthermore, a few learners who appear to have obtained some marks by chance for this test item at the pre-test have failed to obtain even that mark at the post-test and as such their improvement is minus.

Experimental group



Control Group



This finding that the use of explicit instruction to teach grammar in isolation does not help beginner level adult L2 learners to improve their ability to use grammar in contextually appropriate ways can be attributed to the teaching method followed in the study. In other words, the method of presentation of grammatical items seems to have a direct impact on the target language achievement. As explained before, the present study introduced each grammatical item one after the other assuming that one at a time principle may ensure better learning. Also, each grammatical item was explained and taught in isolation and not in context. The form and examples were given in the printed form. Next, the students were encouraged to construct different sentences following the same structure. Although the sentences uttered by learners in this way were unrelated to each other in meaning, this kind of sentence construction was assumed to help language learners to master different structures in a relatively short period of time. This may help the beginner level adults to gradually catch up the target language. Further, when more and more new structures are introduced, the learner may add them to his/her language repertoire and use them to exchange ideas. Further, the acquisition of selected grammatical items allows the second language learners to express a large number of semantic and pragmatic functions. Although the findings of this study do not support these assumptions, the delayed effect of such explicit grammar instruction cannot be completely ignored. Ellis (1997) argues that conscious acquisition of rules helps learners to use them spontaneously and more accurately at a later stage. Accordingly, it is possible that learners who receive explicit grammar instruction in isolation may absorb such grammatical items gradually and use them later. However, this study has not examined the delayed effect of explicit grammar in isolation instruction on the learners' target language achievement.

Language is a complex phenomenon and its association with culture, society, psychology etc. makes language more complex. Formal grammar instruction on form and function does not seem to help one to learn the complex intricacies of a human language. Learner needs as many contacts as possible with the target language to acquire the skills that are necessary to use that language in contextually appropriate ways. Therefore, as explained before, the reason for the poor improvement in the grammar in context test item may be that the learners of both groups have learned the target language grammar in isolation and as such they fail to use the consciously acquired grammatical rules in contextually appropriate ways. The failure to report a significant improvement in this test item, therefore, does not seem to be a consequence of the medium of instruction. This is largely due to the form-focused out-of-context grammar instruction approach that was followed in this study i.e. teaching grammar in isolation. When grammar is presented out of context and learners are denied the opportunity of seeing the systematic relationships that exist between form, meaning and use, they appear to fail to use the language for communication. This finding is in accordance with the views of Krashen (1982) who claims that grammatical explanation helps learners to become fluent in the structures they learn, but learners may not be able to use such consciously learned structures appropriately in spontaneous genuine communication outside the classroom. As learners of either group of this study were not given opportunities to explore grammar in context, they have failed to acquire the skills necessary to use language in contextually appropriate ways. This finding also supports the views of Wilkins (1972) who claims that linguistically and situationally isolated words do not help learners to acquire sociolinguistic functions of those words. However, the finding that formal

explanation on form and function does not enable learners to use the grammar in contextually appropriate ways does not necessarily mean that conscious grammar learning is of no use, yet this finding encourages us to more carefully plan the explicit grammar instruction lessons and provide with more opportunities for the second language learners to engage in communicative activities that allow learners to see the complex intricacies of the human language and its association with culture, society, psychology etc. This conclusion is in accordance with the findings of Kasper and Rose (2002) who point out that explicit instruction along with ample practice opportunities results in the greatest gains.

The study is not without limitations. Hence, the findings of the study need to be interpreted with caution. Small sample size, short duration of the treatment and rigorous control of extraneous variables are some of the limitations of the study. Future studies need to select a bigger sample and increase the treatment period. Also, in addition to the more rigorous experimental component where data are quantitatively analyzed, the use of qualitative techniques to collect data may enable us to gain a more accurate picture of the impact of using explicit grammar instruction on the development of the target language competency. Further, the delayed effects of explicit grammar instruction on the target language competency needs to be investigated. In spite of some limitations, the findings of this study have important implications for language pedagogy and policy.

Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest that the presentation of grammar in isolation does not help the second language learners to improve their ability to use grammar in contextually appropriate ways. However, this does not necessarily mean that explicit grammar instruction has no role in the second language classroom. For instance, explicit grammar instruction could be a starting point, particularly, to the beginner level adult learners who know another language by the time they learn a second language. Further, the teacher can note the grammatical errors learners make during interaction activities and discuss and explain them explicitly. Perhaps, learners may not incorporate such taught structures immediately into their language use, yet this does not mean that such explicit instruction does not have a delayed effect. Therefore, explicit grammar instruction lessons still play an important role in the second language classroom. However, we need to more carefully plan such grammar lessons and use explicit grammar instruction as a springboard in adult beginner level classroom to initiate the process of second language learning. More importantly, opportunities should be created for the second language learners to engage in communicative activities where learners are allowed to see the complex intricacies of the human language and its association with culture, society, psychology etc., because it is such communicative activities that help the learners to see the systematic relationships that exist between form and meaning and use the target language structures they learn in isolation in contextually appropriate ways.

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