
According to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Research “What Kind of Instruction Produces the Best Learning”

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Much of SLA research has the over-arching question: “What kind of instruction produces the best learning?” This article provides an overview of studies that have attempted in some way to answer this question. It also attempts to address whether; there is evidence that allows us to favour one method or approach rather than another? Have the researchers been asking the right questions? Have they been using the appropriate research methods? Ultimately, is it possible to answer this over-arching question?

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES.

During the 1960s the methods of teaching second languages most dominant were the grammar-translation method and the audio-lingual method. The grammar-translation method was based on the theory that language learning was an intellectual process of studying and memorising bilingual vocabulary lists and explicit grammar rules. The audio-lingual method was based on behaviourist theories of learning, which laid importance on habit formation through repeated practice and reinforcement.

Experimental studies were carried out by Scherer and Wertheimer (1964) and Smith (1970) to investigate the learning outcomes of grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods. However the results were inconclusive, with both studies failing to demonstrate the superiority of one method over the other.

Both grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods emphasized the need for grammar teaching, differing only in how grammar was to be taught. However, Newark (1966) argued that learners did not need to engage in any analysis of the language being learned or participate in systematic practice of grammatical structures. These views were reflected years later in proposals for communicative language teaching by Allwright (1979) and Prabhu (1987).

Studies such as Allwright’s and Prabhu’s raised the question of whether teachers should attempt to replicate conditions of naturalistic acquisition (as they suggested) or try to intervene by teaching grammar. A number of proposals concerning how to help learners acquire language naturally have been put forward. Pienemann (1984) conducted an experiment with untutored Italian-speaking children living in Germany learning German as an L2 and gave them tutoring. He collected spontaneous speech data both before and after the instruction. The results suggested that learners should be taught grammatical structures in the same order they learn them. That is to say that the teacher’s instructional input should be focused on the grammatical structure which the learner is prepared to learn. Pienemann (1989) went on to say that grammar instruction was powerless to alter the natural sequence of acquisition and that premature instruction may actually inhibit acquisition. He also proposed that grammar instruction could help learners understand meaning and functions of grammatical structures even if they couldn’t produce them and that grammatical knowledge is not subject to fixed orders.

However the feasibility of obtaining a detailed statement of the order in which grammatical structures are acquired or where in the natural order of development individual learners have reached, are question-

able. Larsen-Freeman's (1976) study established that the orders that were found were in fact largely determined by frequency of occurrence of morphemes in the input.

The alternative which Krashen (1982) proposes is to abandon any attempt to teach grammar. This is based on the assumption that learners acquire grammatical structures naturally provided they gain access to comprehensible input.

According to Terrell (1991), who published *The Natural Approach* with Krashen in 1983, Krashen did not think that explicit grammar instruction was a major factor in the order of acquisition of grammatical forms or structures. In her study, Terrell (1991) goes on to comment that explicit grammar instruction (EGI) is not a major factor in the order or sequence of acquisition of grammatical forms or structures. Neither, does EGI increase fluency or rate of learning and even with regards to accuracy the improvement does not show immediately although it may show in the long term. In spite of this, Terrell proposes that EGI can affect the acquisition process in three different ways: (a) as an advance organizer; (b) as a meaning-form focuser; and (c) as monitoring.

Nikolov and Krashen (1997) researched children who studied English as a foreign language in Hungary with a communication/content-based approach, compared with similar children who studied English with a grammar based traditional approach. The former were slightly more accurate in their production of grammatical morphemes in an oral interview, and were more fluent, concluding that communication-based approaches do not sacrifice accuracy for fluency.

Taken to their extreme, Krashen's views led to the belief that conscious teaching and learning were not useful in the language learning process, and that any attempt to teach or learn language in a formal kind of a way was doomed to failure. However, Widdowson (1990) argues that the concept of teaching "...presupposes invention and intervention which will direct learners in ways they would not, left to their own devices, have an opportunity or inclination to pursue" (p.48). For Widdowson, teaching should not try to replicate the natural conditions of acquisition but to improve them. Although he does not say so, one way this could be achieved is by continuing to teach grammatical structures in some form.

Many of Krashen's ideas have been soundly criticised over the years. But even in spite of the many challenges, Krashen's views have been and remain very influential in the language teaching and learning field. Even Gregg (1984), who criticises Krashen for being "incoherent" and "dogmatic" admits that "he is often right on the important questions" (p.94-95), and in as far as Krashen (1981) believed that language develops through natural communication, he might be considered one of the driving forces behind the communicative language teaching movement which is dominant to the present day.

This method emphasizes the development of communication skills in authentic language use and classroom activities where students are engaged in real-life communication exchanges in the target language. Language in this method is studied in context that includes the linguistic and social contexts of the language.

According to Littlewood (1981), one of the most important aspects of "communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language" (p.1).

An important theoretical principle underlying the communicative language teaching movement is called "communicative competence" by Hymes (1972). Communicative competence is the ability to use language to convey and interpret meaning, and is divided by Canale and Swain (1980) in their study into four separate components: *discourse competence* (the learner's ability to connect utterances into a meaningful whole), *sociolinguistic competence* (the learner's ability to use language appropriately), *strategic competence* (a learner's ability to employ strategies to compensate for imperfect knowledge) and *grammatical competence* (the learner's knowledge of the vocabulary, phonology and rules of the language).

Canale and Swain's principle of grammatical competence is a key component in their proposed framework of communicative language teaching. A learner must have evidence of a developed or developing

rule system. Canale and Swain support Munby's (1978) view that maintaining meaningful communication is not possible without some “knowledge” of grammar.

Beretta and Davies's (1985) study compared experimental classes in Prabhu's Communicational Teaching Project (CTP) that were not taught any grammar, with control classes outside the project that were taught by means of the structural oral-situational method, in a series of tests. Beretta and Davies's findings suggest little support for Prabhu's central claim that structure is best acquired without a conscious focus on form. Studies by Spada and Lightbown (1993) show that some form of grammar teaching helps learners to progress through developmental sequences more rapidly, and White et al's (1991) study show that greater accuracy can be achieved in grammatical structures. Sheen (2003) further supports this view in particular for advanced English language learners.

Thus the dominant view emerging from SLA researchers as to what is the best kind of instruction for learning is that it should be communicative with elements of grammar as noted by Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001). Most classroom teachers have been arguing this balanced view for years.

That is not to say the role of form-focused instruction in L2 acquisition as an element within communicative language teaching is without controversy. Ellis (1997) states that in recent years attention has shifted from investigating whether form-focused instruction, generally defined, works to identifying which types of instruction work best. So a reasonable question SLA researchers might ask is not so much “if” but “how?”

According to Long (1991) “focus on forms” must be distinguished from “focus on form.” Focus on forms is the traditional notion of teaching with a focus on the elements of grammar, in isolation from context or communicative activity and the primary organizing principle of course design is accumulation of individual language elements. However focus on form entails a prerequisite engagement in meaning before attention to linguistic features can be expected to be effective, and fits within the communicative language teaching framework. But should this focus on form be implicit or explicit? This question of what level of obtrusiveness in communicative teaching is ideal is a question teachers have often asked and SLA researchers have tried to answer.

Ellis (1997) says in **explicit** focus on form, learners are provided with data which illustrate the use of a particular grammatical structure which they analyze in order to arrive at some generalization that accounts for regularities in the data. It should be noted that this explicit focus on form is different from explicit grammar teaching in the traditional sense of grammar translation as it is within the communicative framework where learners through selective learning are building and then testing hypotheses. **Implicit** focus on form includes a flood of input which consists of input that has been enriched by including plentiful exemplars of the target feature or the careful organization of input which is enhanced to increase the prominence of the target structure in the input.

Controlled laboratory experiments such as Robinson's (1996) study investigated 104 Japanese adult learners of English comparing explicit and implicit focus on form. The learners were instructed in both conditions and after a grammaticality judgment test it was found that explicit focus on form was better for simple grammar structures whereas for more complex structures the findings were less clear-cut. Similar results were found by DeKeyser (1995) in his study using an artificial language called Implexan. Ellis (1993) in his study of the learning of rules of Welsh morphology by native English speakers found the converse, although it should be noted that the explicit instruction was of a particular type, that is, rules blended with especially relevant examples.

Classroom-based studies such as White's (1998) attempted to make salient the English third person singular possessive determiners to French learners of English. She increased the frequency of encounters via a book flood, and involved highlighting of the graphical appearance of the forms via bolding, italicizing and changing font size. In addition she varied the types of enhancements from text to text to increase the

likelihood of being noticed. Three specific conditions of learner engagement with input were compared: a natural input condition, an input enhancement condition, and an enhancement plus book flood condition. The findings of this study suggest that all three conditions were beneficial to the learners, since the performance of all three had improved by the first posttest. The enhancement plus book flood showed some advantage in the immediate posttest; however the other two groups had caught up by the delayed posttest a month later. White suggests that it is possible that all three conditions were equally, but minimally, effective because of their implicitness and perhaps the learners needed more assistance in using the input to construct the determined system.

In another classroom-based study Jourdenais et al. (1995) demonstrated that learners are more likely to notice visually enhanced linguistic material than the same material in an unenhanced format. Spanish preterit and imperfect characters were coded in larger fonts than the rest of the characters. However this study was not a study of acquisition, because the effects of this increased noticing on interlanguage restructuring were not examined. Thus, further research is needed, but it seems likely that input enhancement could be an effective implicit focus on form technique.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS.

Following the above overview of studies, methodology for form-focus instruction (FFI) research (including studies for the “if” and “how” of grammar instruction) is of most interest to us within SLA research, in this article. Research methods for FFI research are usually confirmatory or interpretive. **Confirmatory** research includes comparative and experimental studies that manipulate the learning context and quantitative analyses. Comparative studies compare groups of naturalistic and instructed learners. The problem is that an assumption is made that the naturalistic groups have not received FFI and instructed learners have indeed received FFI. This is a crude assumption usually based on the learners setting. Experimental studies such as Robinson’s (1996), DeKeyser (1995) and Ellis (1993) may be carried out in laboratories in which case variables can be rigorously controlled but can lack ecological validity which is so important if it is to be used for pedagogical application. The converse is true for classroom based studies.

Interpretive research includes descriptive and introspective studies and also emphasizes quantitative analyses. Descriptive studies ideally need to be longitudinal to show how instructed learners’ interlanguage develops over time. But this raises the difficulty of collecting data within a classroom setting, where typically learner utterances are short, sparse and usually highly controlled. Introspective studies seek to examine what beliefs classroom participants have about FFI. They make use of think-aloud and retrospective data collection methods. The validity and reliability issues of these methods are well known. Researchers would all probably agree that both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies are both essential

Have the researchers been asking the right questions? As can be seen in the development of the overview section of this article, much of early SLA research was directed towards theory development and was committed to providing information on how an L2 is acquired by describing the language produced by L2 learners (i.e. the object of enquiry). Furthermore was the emergence of research based on Chomsky’s theory of Universal Grammar, which tries to investigate how abstract principles operate in L2 acquisition. This research has been motivated by a desire to test a linguistic theory rather than to address the practical problems of teaching. This created a gap between SLA researchers, who were concerned with technical knowledge and teachers who wanted practical pedagogical advice as to what kinds of instruction produced the best learning. However over the years some SLA researchers have looked at ways of bridging the gap between research and classroom practice. Gradually some SLA researchers began to debate the role of grammar teaching in language pedagogy and specifically whether it has a place in communicative language

teaching. Finally more recently researchers have started asking the question which arguably is of greatest interest to teachers; *how* to teach grammar? Even though many researchers are still cautious of applying SLA research to pedagogy at least they too are starting to ask (and answer to some extent) the practical questions of the instructor.

As to whether there is evidence allowing us to favour one method over another, it would probably be fair to say that to a greater or lesser extent all of these various methods and approaches discussed in the overview have had some influence on the contemporary language learning and teaching field. The teaching field has tended in recent years to move away from dogmatic positions of “right” or “wrong” and to become much more diverse in its attitudes and is willing to recognise the potential merits of a wide variety of possible methods and approaches, as noted by writers such as Larsen-Freeman (1987). That is not to say that empirical research evidence has not allowed us to come to some conclusions such as the need to teach some form of grammar even in a communicative context. However even this can be refuted by those like Krashen who have proposed “theories”. But proposals based on “theories” are so attractive because by their very nature they can not be dismissed by pointing out limitations of specific research studies. A theory is general in nature and therefore proposals derived from it are potentially valid in a variety of teaching contexts. Further still in line with this interest in eclecticism, educators are becoming increasingly interested in the contribution made by the learners themselves in the teaching/learning partnership. Awareness has been growing for some time that “any learning is an active process” (Rivers, 1983, p.134) and the idea that language learners are individuals who can take charge of their own learning and achieve some form of autonomy.

For all the above reasons I think it would be very difficult to ultimately answer what kind of instruction produces the best kind of learning by just looking at SLA research studies and proposing a single overarching solution. The variables involved in learning a language are too many (e.g. learner, instructor, motivation, objectives etc.). However in this ongoing process we can come to an understanding of some of the elements that can make up successful instruction.

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