

## The Significance of the Implicit versus Explicit Distinction for Language Pedagogy

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## Some Theoretical Issues

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## Implicit Language Learning

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Implicit language learning takes place:

- without intentionality
- without awareness of what has been learned
- but can involve awareness at the level of 'noticing'.

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## Explicit Language Learning

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Explicit language learning occurs:

- Intentionally (i.e. the learner is consciously trying to learn x)
- With awareness (i.e. the learner 'makes and tests hypotheses in search for structure' – N. Ellis, 1994).

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## Implicit knowledge of an L2

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Implicit knowledge of an L2 is:

- Tacit and intuitive
- Procedural (available for automatic processing)
- Both target-like and non-target-like
- Only evident in learners' communicative verbal behaviour

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## Explicit Knowledge of an L2

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Explicit knowledge of an L2 is:

- Conscious
- Declarative
- May be imprecise and inaccurate
- Available for use through controlled processing
- Verbalizable

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## Implicit instruction

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Two types of implicit instruction

1. Instruction is entirely meaning-based (unfocused tasks)
2. Instruction is meaning-based but also is designed to attract attention to a specific target form (focused tasks)

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## Explicit instruction

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Explicit instruction:

- Has a pre-determined focus on a specific linguistic form
- Aims to make learners fully conscious of this form
- Can involve both controlled and meaning-based practice
- Often involves the use of metalinguistic terminology.

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## Some questions

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1. To what extent can implicit learning occur in the adult foreign language classroom?
2. What is the relationship between implicit/explicit learning and implicit/explicit instruction?
3. How much emphasis should teachers of adult foreign language learners place on implicit and explicit learning?
4. How important is that foreign language learners develop metalinguistic knowledge of the L2?

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## The interface issue

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The interface issue addresses a number of questions:

1. To what extent and in what ways are implicit and explicit learning related?
2. Does explicit knowledge convert into or facilitate the acquisition of implicit knowledge?
3. Does explicit knowledge convert into implicit knowledge?
4. Does explicit instruction result in the acquisition of implicit as well as explicit knowledge?

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## Different positions

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1. The non-interface position
2. The strong interface position
3. The weak interface position

All instruction is premised on one (or more) of these positions.

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## My own theory of L2 instruction

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1. The main goal of L2 instruction is to develop implicit knowledge.
2. This can be best achieved through a mixture of implicit and explicit instruction.
3. Implicit instruction provides opportunities for learners to develop implicit knowledge and thus caters to the development of communicative ability.
4. Explicit instruction should be directed at developing explicit knowledge that will facilitate the processes involved in implicit learning.

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## Questions

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1. Which of the interface positions do you favor?
2. To what extent do you agree with my theory of L2 instruction?
3. What is your own theory?

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## Implicit language instruction

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## Instructional approaches

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There are a number of instructional approaches that are implicit in nature:

1. The Natural Approach
2. Content-based language teaching
3. Task- based language teaching

They all involve the use of 'unfocused tasks'

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## What is a task?

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Tasks have the following characteristics:

1. A primary focus on meaning
2. A gap of some kind – this motivates the learners to communicate.
3. Learners' use of their own linguistic resources
4. An outcome other than the display of correct language.

Tasks can be unfocused or focused.

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## An example of unfocussed task

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The map task:

1. Students given a blank outline of a map.
2. The teacher describes the locations of different places on the map.
3. Students draw in the places on the map.

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## Three misconceptions about tasks

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1. Tasks require oral production.
  - tasks can be designed for any of the four language skills
  - tasks often involve integrated skill work
2. Tasks require students to work in small groups.
  - tasks can be conducted in a whole-class context with the teacher or in small groups or be completed individually by students.
3. Tasks are intended to promote 'fluency'
  - Tasks cater to both 'fluency' and the acquisition of new linguistic knowledge

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## Focussed tasks

Focussed tasks have the same characteristics as unfocussed tasks.

They are designed to make the use of some pre-determined linguistic feature:

1. Natural
2. Useful
3. Essential

Students are not told what linguistic feature they are supposed to use.

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## An example of a focussed task

### Candidates for a job

You are the owner of a private language school and have advertised for a new English teacher. Below are summaries of the CVs of four applicants. Discuss each applicant and then decide which one to offer the job to.

JOCK, aged 30  
B.A. in social studies.  
Has spent a year working his way round the world.  
Has spent six years teaching economics in state school.  
Has written a highly successful novel about teachers.  
Has lived in a back-to-nature commune for two years.  
Has been married twice - now divorced. Two children.  
Has been running local youth group for three years.

BETTY, aged 45  
Has been married for 24 years, three children.  
Has not worked most of that time.  
Has done evening courses in youth guidance.  
Has spent the last year teaching pupils privately for state - with good results.  
Has been constantly active in local government - has been elected to local council twice.

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## Focus on Form

While students are performing tasks (both unfocussed and focussed) opportunities arise for focusing attention on specific linguistic forms.

This focus can be:

- extensive (in the case of unfocused tasks)
- intensive (in the case of focused tasks).

The focus on form can arise in different ways.

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## Ways of focusing on form

1. Pre-emptive focus on form
  - Teacher initiated
  - Student initiated
2. Reactive focus on form
  - Negotiation of meaning vs. negotiation of form
  - Input-providing vs. output-prompting
  - Implicit vs. explicit
3. Immediate vs. delayed focus on form.

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## Some examples of focus on form

1. Learner: He pass ... past tense?  
Teacher: Yeah.  
Learner: he passed his house.
2. Learner: He pass his house.  
Teacher: He passed his house?  
Learner: Yeah, he passed his house.
3. Learner: He pass his house.  
Teacher: Sorry?  
Learner: He passed is house.

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## Questions

1. What is the difference between a 'task' and an 'exercise'?
2. What factors need to be considered in deciding whether to use unfocussed or focussed tasks?
3. How would you conduct focus on form?
4. How can a teacher tell if a task results in learning?

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## Explicit Language Instruction

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## The components of explicit instruction

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1. Presentation of the target feature – this typically involves some form of **metalinguistic explanation** of the feature.
2. Practice - this typically involves the use of 'exercises' (both controlled and meaning-based).

Present-practice-produce

Focus-on-forms

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## Characteristics of Practice

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1. There is some attempt to isolate a specific grammatical feature for focused attention.
  2. The learners are required to produce sentences containing the targeted feature.
  3. The learners will be provided with opportunities for repetition of the targeted feature.
  4. It is expected that the learners will perform the grammatical feature correctly.
  5. The learners receive feedback on whether their performance of the grammatical structure is correct or not. This feedback is usually immediate.
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## The purpose of practice

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The practice stage consists of a series of exercises . . . whose aim is to cause the learners to absorb the structure thoroughly; or to put it another way, to transfer what they know from short-term to long-term memory' (Ur, 1988).

You do the minimum amount of talking yourself. You are a skilful conductor of an orchestra, giving each performer a chance to participate and monitoring the performance to see it is satisfactory (Byrne, 1986).

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## An example of practice

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1. T: Nun, erm, auf der nächsten Seite.  
Und warum sind sie im Schirmgeschäft?  
Mary.  
2. S1: Erm, sie sind im Schirmgeschäft,  
erm (.2.) weil sie (.1) möchten eine  
Schirm kaufen.
  3. T: Was meinen die anderen? ist das richtig,  
was Mary sagt? (.3.) Roger, Sie schütteln  
den Kopf. Verstehen Sie? Sie schütteln den  
Kopf. Shaking your head. Wie sagen Sie es?  
Warum sind sie im Schirmgeschäft?  
4. S2: Erm, weil sie einen Schirm kaufen  
möchten.
  5. T: Weil Frau Meyer einen Schirm kaufen  
möchte. Und Mary sagte, weil Frau Meyer  
möchte einen Schirm kaufen.
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## Problems with practice

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1. Learners have their own built-in syllabus and may not be developmentally ready to acquire the target feature.
  2. Learners are likely to have difficulty in transferring knowledge from controlled to communicative practice.
  3. There is very little evidence that 'practice makes perfect' where grammatical structures are concerned.
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## Metalinguistic explanation

Metalinguistic explanation is directed at helping learners develop explicit knowledge of a feature.

There are two ways in which teachers can provide metalinguistic information about a target feature:

1. Directly
2. Indirectly – using consciousness-raising tasks

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## Consciousness-raising tasks

1. A specific linguistic feature is isolated for focused attention
2. the learners are provided with data which illustrate the target feature
3. the learners are asked to perform one or more operations on the data
4. the learners are expected to utilize intellectual effort to understand the target feature
5. the learners may optionally be required to verbalize a rule describing the target feature

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## An example of CR task

- A. What is the difference between verbs like 'give' and 'explain'?
- She gave a book to her father (= grammatical)  
 She gave her father a book (=grammatical)  
 The policeman explained the law to Mary (= grammatical)  
 The policeman explained Mary the law (= ungrammatical).
- B. Indicate whether the following sentences are grammatical or ungrammatical.
1. They saved mark a seat.
  2. His father read Kim a story.
  3. She donated the hospital some money.
  4. They suggested Mary a trip on the river.
  5. They reported the police the accident.
  6. They threw Mary a party.
  7. The bank lent Mr. Thatcher some money.
  8. He indicated Mary the right turning.
  9. The festival generated the college a lot of money.
  10. He cooked his girl friend a cake.
- C. Work out a rule for verbs like 'give' and 'explain'.  
 List the verbs in B that are like 'give' (i.e. permit both sentence patterns) and those that are like 'explain' (i.e. allow only one sentence pattern).  
 What is the difference between the verbs in your two lists?

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## Using CR tasks

1. CR tasks can be used in a variety of ways:
  - In the presentation stage of a PPP lesson
  - In the post-task stage of a task-based lesson
  - By themselves

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## Rationale for CR tasks

1. They develop explicit knowledge will facilitate the subsequent development of implicit knowledge by assisting 'noticing' and 'noticing the gap'
2. They involve discovery-learning and thus are more likely to result in long-term learning.
3. If performed in the L2 they also double up as unfocussed tasks – i.e. grammar becomes a content to talk about.

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## Questions

1. What are your own views about the merits of PPP?
2. How important do you consider controlled practice? How can you tell whether it 'works'?
3. Do you prefer to provide metalinguistic explanations of language points yourself or to invite students to discover rules for themselves through CR tasks?
4. What do you see as the limitations of CR tasks?

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## Constructing a Balanced Language Curriculum

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## Choice of syllabus

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1. A structural syllabus catering to 'focus-on-forms':
    - involving PPP
    - involving just consciousness-raising activities.
  1. A task-based syllabus catering to 'focus on form'
  2. A modular syllabus that contains both a structural and a task-based **component.**
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