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The role and effect of explicit grammar instruction in SLA

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Abstract

The aim of this project was to analyze the role and effect of explicit grammar instruction that is focus on form, in L2 learning, especially in non-naturalistic settings where learners are hardly exposed to the L2 outside school. First, the students participated in an oral interview. Secondly, they had to identify the correct sentence they had previously produced in the oral interview in student-specific tests, which offered ten pairs of sentences. Each pair had a correct sentence and an incorrect option added by the researcher. Third, they analyzed their choices by providing explicit or implicit explanations. The majority of students were able to choose the correct sentence and explain their correct choice in the student-specific tests. Students preferred to explain most of the structures through explicit knowledge. Implicit knowledge was only used when the technical terms to explain the phenomenon lacked. The study showed that previous explicit grammar instruction could contribute in some way to SLA.

Introduction

Although defining explicit knowledge is somehow problematic, R. Ellis (2004) states that it is the conscious awareness of the structure of a language. He claims emphatically that language acquisition can be speeded up by explicit instruction (p.145), and, somewhat more contentiously, that without any focus on form or consciousness raising (…), formal accuracy is an unlikely result (p.175).

The aim of this study is to analyze the role and effect that explicit grammar instruction, that is focus on form, play in L2 learning, especially in non-naturalistic settings where learners are hardly exposed to the L2 outside school. This is a relevant matter for language learning to test the effectiveness of form-focused approaches.

This study analyzes students' ability to provide grammatical rules and structures after production in spontaneous speech in the Secondary school context, where students are exposed to focus-on form continuously during their learning process.

Theoretical background

The role of explicit knowledge depends on the language-learning hypothesis we focus on. Krashen's input hypothesis stated that we acquired a language by understanding messages and that comprehensible input (CI) was the essential factor for language acquisition. Krashen (1980) stated that language was acquired by understanding input that was "a little beyond" the current level of knowledge, in situations where the focus was not on form but on the message. Consequently, output emerged as a result of exposition to input. In fact, if there was enough input, the necessary structures would be automatically provided. Grammatical sequencing was not only seen as not necessary but it was also considered harmful. The classroom seemed to be the right place for elementary language teaching, since it provided simplified comprehensible input, which could not be found in non-naturalistic settings. This hypothesis considered the language teacher as someone who could help make input comprehensible and not as someone who gave information about formal structures.

According to Krashen, regarding form-focused instruction (FFI) as contributing to second language acquisition was controversial. He stated that the spontaneous use of a rule was the result of a completely independent process of acquisition, which took place subconsciously through exposure to input. Krashen argued consistently that the effect of form-focused instruction (FFI) was only useful for learning simple structures and that explicit knowledge only played a role in L2 production through monitoring.

However, other authors (Swain, 1985; Ellis, 1990) claimed that input was not enough for acquiring linguistic competence due to the fact that not all the input learners were exposed to became intake or, in other words, the succeeding input that helped the learner to acquire the language. Therefore, second language acquisition did not seem to take place through implicit knowledge alone.

In 1985, Swain formulated "The Output Hypothesis" which claimed that output was also necessary for language acquisition. Findings of French immersion programmes arose some doubts about whether input should be considered as the only determining factor for language acquisition. Learners noticed a lack of fluency and accuracy in the

target language after years of exposure to input. The fact that learners could not produce some L2 structures simply accessing their intuitions about the L2 suggested that input and implicit knowledge were not enough to acquire the L2, especially in non-naturalistic settings. Swain stated that both input and output were necessary for language acquisition. When producing output, noticing the gap between learners' production and the target language may be an important step to redirect learners' attention to relevant input. "This awareness triggers cognitive processes that have been implicated in second language learning, ones in which learners generate linguistic knowledge which is new for them, or which consolidates their current existing knowledge", (Swain and Lapkin, 1995, p.371).

Swain's output hypothesis emphasized the role of output and introduced the concept of "noticing". This concept was later developed by Schmidt (1990) in "The Noticing Hypothesis". Schmidt stated that learners could not acquire a language feature until they had become aware of it, and thus, new linguistic knowledge should be preceded by it being noticed in the input. He claimed that input did not become intake for language learning unless it was noticed, and therefore consciously registered. Schmidt argued that noticing required focal attention on the part of the learner.

Although the boundaries between explicit and implicit knowledge remain controversial, in 2008, Ellis differentiated between implicit and explicit knowledge. On the one hand, he said that implicit knowledge was intuitive, procedural, systematically variable, and automatic and, thus, available for use in fluent unplanned language use. And it was not verbalizable. Furthermore, other theorists (Krashen 1975; Lennenberg 1967, 1969; Scovel 1967) claimed that it was only learnable before learners reach a critical age (e.g. puberty).

On the contrary, Ellis (2008) stated that explicit knowledge was conscious, declarative and only accessible through controlled processing in planned language use. It was verbalizable, and it entailed semi-technical or technical metalanguage. Like any type of factual knowledge, it was potentially learnable at any age and consequently, language rules could be performed automatically if the sequences were sufficiently practised. Explicit knowledge made learners became consciously aware of their knowledge about the L2 and recognized ungrammaticality (Ellis, 2008).

The prevailing view at the moment concerning L2 learning states that learning is developed gradually over time (Willis & Willis, 2007). Therefore, learners are expected to follow their own internal process to acquire L2 characteristics. As a result of this and given the importance of both explicit and implicit knowledge, L2 instruction should ideally engage students in communicative activities that will result in acquisition. Even though the communicative approach seems to have a positive effect on L2 learning, explicit grammar instruction can support that development of implicit knowledge, especially in non-naturalistic settings where learners are hardly exposed to the target language. As it has been explained above, both explicit and implicit knowledge seem to be important and necessary for language acquisition in instructed settings.

Our study tries to analyze whether years of exposure to explicit grammar instruction would enable students to provide explicit grammar rules for what they had accurately produced orally in a previous interview. Green and Hetch (1992) carried out a similar study dealing with learners' provision of explicit grammar rules. The authors conducted an empirical research in order to analyze the reasons why foreign language learners often fail to apply the explicit grammar rules they are taught, when confronted with communicative tasks. These authors asked German learners of English from different levels to identify different errors committed by German pupils performing communicative tasks. The learners' ability to state relevant rules and supply appropriate correction was examined with reference to some of the assumptions and expectations that lied behind explicit grammar teaching. These authors found out that students corrected a very high rate of ungrammatical sentences and classified the successful high rates of rules provided according to the following criteria: I) referred to easily recognized categories; 2) could be applied mechanically; 3) were not dependent on large contexts. The pedagogical recommendation that Green and Hetch (1992) made was that if grammar rules were going to be taught explicitly, it was rules like this that should be the focus of instruction in foreign language teaching.

The present study was based on a similar research carried out with Polish learners of English. Sheffler and Cinciata (2010) examined to what extent learners could identify and understand correct grammatical structures they had produced spontaneously. They recorded L2 learners of English and created student-specific tests according to what each learner had accurately produced orally. Learners had to identify the grammaticality

of the structures provided in the tests and tried to provide an explicit rule for them. In terms of SLA, it seemed that there were very few categories that learners only knew implicitly. Consequently, their explicit grammar knowledge was considered as contributing in an indirect way to SLA.

The following research questions guide this project:

Are L2 learners of English able to provide explicit explanations for the grammatical structures that they use correctly in their oral performance?

Has form-focused instruction helped L2 learners of English to explain the grammatical structures that they use correctly in spontaneous speech?

Method

Background

Communicative approaches prevail over form-focused ones in the early stages of education in Infant (2-5 years of age) and Primary School (5-12 years of age). Afterwards, there is a turn towards grammar-based approaches, which are mainly used to prepare students for the external evaluation of official exams such as Cambridge exams, EOI exams, or the Leaving Certificate, called Selectividad. On average Spanish students are taught 3 hours of English per week; however, some semi-private and private schools offer 5 hours per week. The 2 extra hours are usually devoted to practicing oral skills, especially speaking.

The communicative approach emerged as a need to engage foreign learners in real-life communicative situations within the classroom. It was a meaning-based, learner-centered approach to L2 teaching, where fluency was given emphasis over accuracy. The emphasis was on the comprehension and production of messages not on the teaching or correction of language form.

This type of teaching approach prevails in the early stages of Infant and Primary Education. In these stages communication is given more importance and there are no formal English written tests. However, when students begin to be evaluated with written tests the teaching approach shifts to more grammar-based and focus on form teaching methods.

Regarding grammar-based teaching methods, Ellis (2006) stated that teaching grammar involved any instructional technique that drew learners' attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helped them either to understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they could internalize it (p.84). Therefore grammar-based approaches were based on the presentation of one or more grammatical features in a lesson and its practice through drills.

The methodological shift into form-focused instruction within Secondary Education in the Spanish Educative System occurs due to the final evaluation exam, which measures mainly students' written competence. Therefore, the type of instruction that the students of this project had been exposed to could be defined as the weak version of communicative language teaching (CLT) (Howatt, 1984:279). This means a systematically and explicit teaching of grammar combined with a variety of communicative activities. Howatt (1984) distinguished between the strong and weak versions of communicative language teaching. He defined the weak version of CLT as an approach to L2 teaching that could incorporate focus on form and meaning, either through direct instruction and/or through feedback. The strong version was linked to strictly meaning-focused approaches.

However, it might be useful to point out that not all teachers who report using the same method implement it in the same way. Experience indicates that all methods have instructional techniques and strategies that differ in their effectiveness according to different contexts and groups of learners. Cummins and Davison (2007) claimed that a balance needed to be struck between form-focused and meaning-focused L2 instruction. Nevertheless, describing communicative language teaching as an approach to L2 learning that incorporates form and meaning remains very controversial for North American authors.

School Context

The school chosen for this study is called San Cernin and it is a semi-private school in Pamplona. The school receives funds from the government and at the same time it is defined as a foundation headed by the families who also invest money to improve their resources. San Cernin is set in an upper-middle class district called Iturrama. Children that attend this centre come from the same background. According to some statistics carried out in the school, 95% of the children who start studying in this school at the age of three end up passing the Leaving Certificate, when they are 18 years old.

The centre is well known in Pamplona due to its multilingual teaching policies. English and French are compulsory subjects for all students who enter the school since they are 3 and 6 years of age respectively. German is offered as an elective subject in Secondary Education. Apart from studying 5 hours of English per week, there are also subjects taught in English such as Physical Education, Science and Art both in Primary and Secondary Education. The existing English program is based on the demands of Cambridge official exams as the majority of students take PET exam (6th Primary), FCE exam (4th Lower Secondary Education) and CAE exam (2nd Higher Secondary Education). Those students who decide not to take part in these exams follow the official curriculum established by the Spanish Ministry of Education. Therefore, each course from 1st Lower Secondary Education to 2nd Higher Secondary Education is divided into four different groups according to their level of English and the results obtained in each of those official exams. The participants of this study had taken the corresponding Cambridge exams: 7 of them had passed the FCE and the other 3 had just passed CAE exam in the academic year of the study.

One coordinator, who is a teacher in Lower and Higher Secondary Education herself, and 8 teachers, 2 male and 6 female, form the Secondary English department.

Participants

The participants were 10 Spanish students of English from 2nd Higher Secondary Education, aged 17-18. The students were randomly selected for the study. Students were attending English instruction at an advanced level at their school, although only

three of them had passed the official exam (CAE). The rest had achieved an upper-intermediate level (FCE) in the previous years.

There were 7 females and 3 males in the group. 2 students had spent one academic year in an English speaking country and 7 students an average of one month each. There was only one student who had never been to an English speaking country.

Instruments

The instruments used for this study were an oral interview and a student-specific test created by the researcher based on an analysis of the oral interviews. Each student-specific test included ten pairs of sentences. Each pair was formed by one correct sentence that the students had produced orally and the incorrect version of that sentence created by the researcher.

Procedure

Each student was interviewed by the researcher. The topics and pictures provided to students dealt with bad habits, healthy lifestyle, different kinds of transport, famous people, leisure activities and imaginary situations. Some of these topics were consciously selected in order to activate specific grammatical structures. The interviews took place in the school during two English lessons. They lasted between 5 and 10 minutes and were recorded. All the recordings were transcribed and intended grammatical features - modal verbs, relative pronouns, conditionals, the non pro-drop phenomena, 3rd person singular morpheme and gerunds - were isolated and analysed. All these grammatical features had been taught explicitly.

Student-specific tests were created using sentences that students had used accurately in the oral interviews. The tests were completed by students in a 3rd English lesson. Students were given the opportunity to explain the ungrammaticality of incorrect sentences in their mother tongue, Spanish, in case they had problems to do it in English. However, all students gave their explanations in English.

Data Analysis

In order to analyse the kind of knowledge that students resorted to when they gave a grammatical explanation, explicit and implicit knowledge were taken into account. Explanations were considered explicit when the intended grammatical rule was provided accurately. They were considered implicit when the correct language was provided without making use of technical terms. In a few cases, students did not provide any explanation. In those cases, the explanations were considered as non-stated. In addition, some of the explanations were considered "unrelated" when they had nothing to do with the intended grammatical rule.

Two tables were created to analyze the data from the student-specific tests. The first table included the data related to the individual grammaticality judgement given by each student. The data on that table was divided individually depending on the grammatical explanation given into: explicit, implicit, non-stated and unrelated. The data collected from these grammatical explanations was included in another table. Afterwards, two bar charts were designed with the data from the grammaticality judgements and the explanations. Finally, from the results gathered in both bar charts another table was created in order to show the percentages of correct sentences selected, explicit, implicit, non-stated and unrelated explanations.

Results

Table 1 presents the percentages of correct sentences selected and the different explanations given by students.

Table1. Percentages of correct sentences selected and its explanations

Student	Correct Selection %	Explicit Explanation %	Implicit Explanation %	Non-Stated %	Unrelated %
Total %	86	54	29	4	15

The majority of students (86%) selected the correct grammatical sentence. Students gave explicit explanations in 54% of these cases, implicit explanations were used in 29% of the cases and finally, in 19% of the occasions students did not provide any explanation or gave incorrect or unrelated answers.

Figure 1 contains the results obtained by students when they had to judge the grammaticality of the sentences provided in the student-specific tests. Blue columns represent when students selected the grammatical sentence of the pair whereas red columns represent the selection of the ungrammatical sentence.

**Figure1. Correct Grammaticality Judgement**
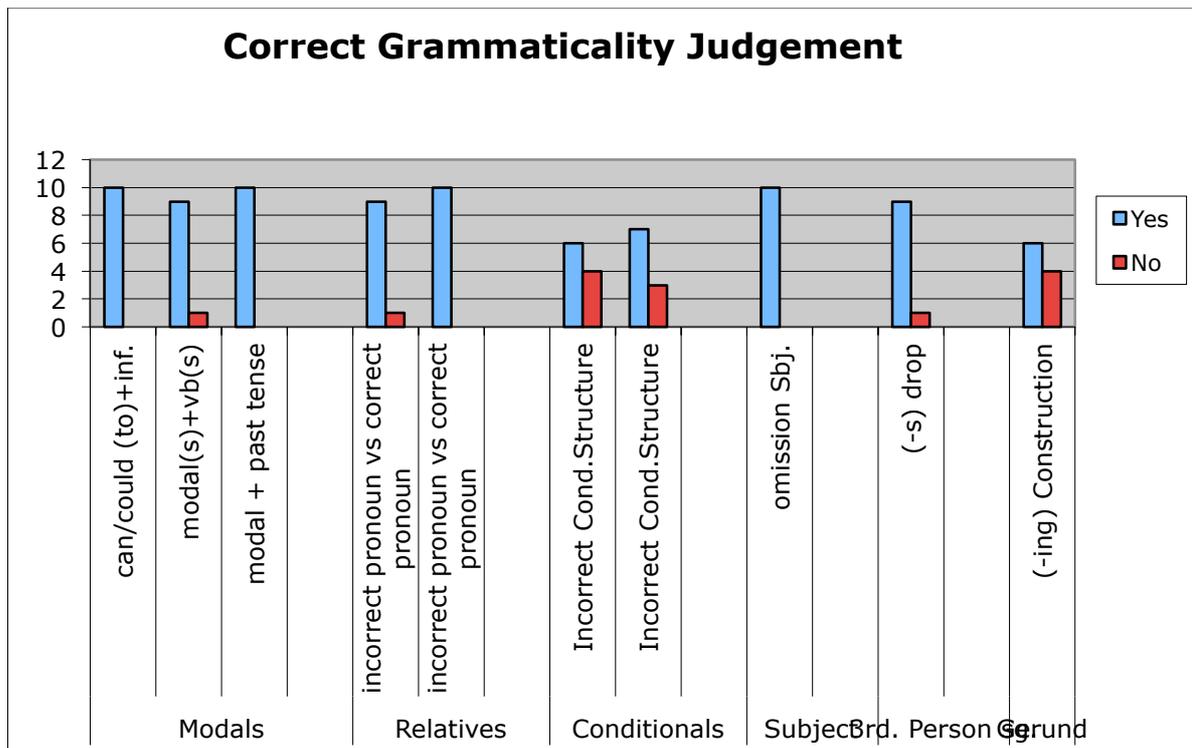
As it can be seen in Figure 1, all of the students were able to judge correctly the ungrammaticality of sentences including modals verbs *can/could* followed by *to infinitive*, modals followed by a past tense, incorrect relative pronouns and omitted subjects.

9 out of 10 participants judged correctly the ungrammaticality of sentences related to modal verbs followed by a *3rd person simple present tense*, incorrect pronouns and the lack of the *3rd person simple present* morpheme.

6 out of 4 participants chose the correct *–ing* construction. And finally, 6 out of 4 students chose the correct option in the first set of incorrect conditional structures whereas 7 out of 3 did it correctly in the second set.

Figure 2 contains the kind of explanations that students gave to justify the ungrammaticality of the incorrect sentences. Blue columns represent explicit explanations and red columns implicit ones. Yellow columns stand for non-stated answers whereas green columns represent incorrect or unrelated explanations.

Figure2. Students' explanations
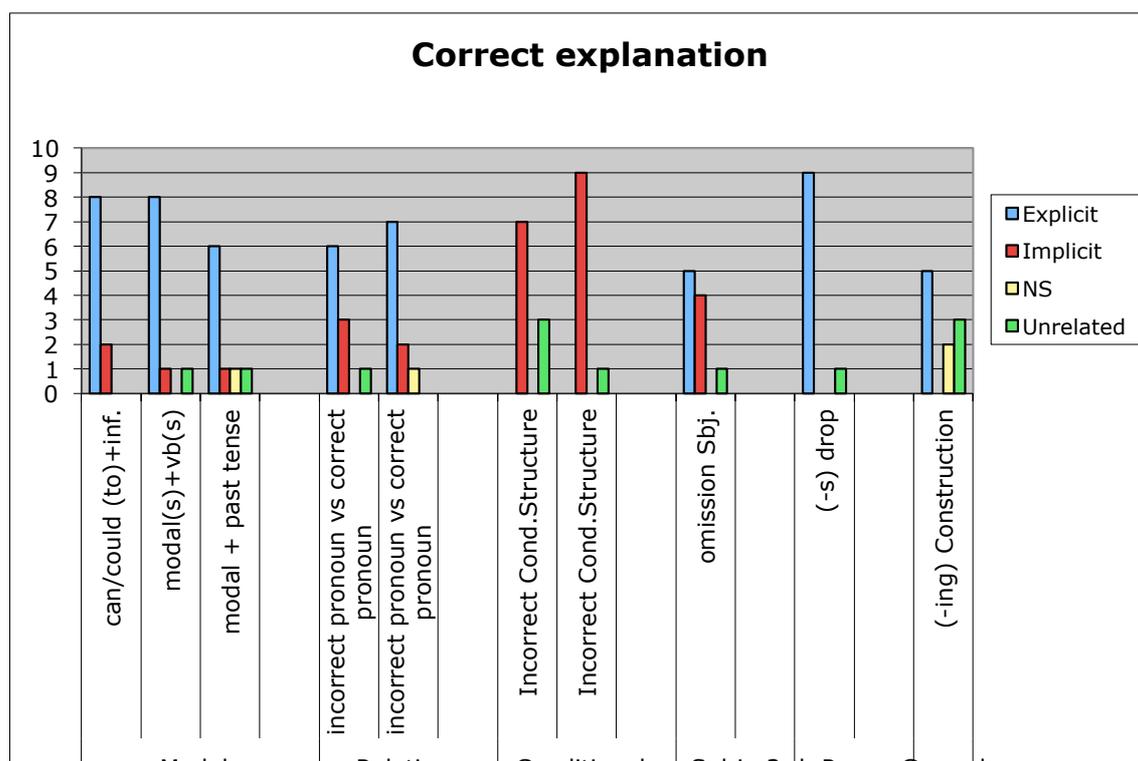
The majority of students gave an explicit explanation when they had to justify the ungrammaticality of sentences, which contained modal verbs, relative pronouns and *3rd person singular* morpheme. Conditional structures were not explained by means of

explicit knowledge but rather based on implicit intuitions. Finally, 5 out of 10 students explained the non pro-drop phenomena and *–ing* constructions explicitly

Discussion

It is worth mentioning the high number of correct sentences selected (86%). The fact that students produced them orally and were able to identify them later could lead us to the conclusion that those grammatical structures had reached the stage of conscious automatization. The number of explicit explanations (54%) supported the fact that years of exposure to an L2 form-focused approach had enabled students to provide explicit explanations for certain grammatical structures. And thus, form-focused instruction had helped L2 learners to achieve this goal.

In relation to the kind of knowledge that learners appealed to when they explained the ungrammaticality of the incorrect sentences, it could be highlighted that it depended on the grammatical feature they dealt with. It seemed that students relied on their implicit intuitions in similar grammatical features.

The first case concerned omitted subjects. Although all students were able to recognize the ungrammaticality of omitted subjects in English, the explanations they gave varied. Half of the students gave an explicit explanation for the rule: *"There must be a subject in English"*, whereas 4 of them gave a simple meaning-based explanation of limited validity (Westney 1994:77): *"If you don't write it, you don't know which situation they refer to"*.

First, it could be said that students had internalized the non-pro drop phenomenon in English, which is usually a common mistake for Spanish learners of English since Spanish allows omitted subjects. It might be seen as an evident feature, however, it has wide and complex implications for the structure of the language, which can not be considered as simple. This fact can be observed in the function of the items it/there, which could be problematic for Spanish learners of English. Nevertheless, all of the students noticed that the verbal subject was needed. This internalization might have occurred due to the importance this phenomenon is given since the early stages of English learning. Moreover, students had been constantly exposed to this kind of

phenomenon and consequently its level of practice had also been very high both in oral and written tasks. Second, explicit explanations were similar to those found in textbooks while implicit explanations were considered of limited validity due to the fact that they may explain the phenomenon but they may not be applied universally.

Despite extensive investigation regarding the classification of a grammar rule system, it remains highly resistant to organize. There are rules designed for pedagogical use, assumedly more accessible to the learner. Although an appropriate formulation for a generalization could help L2 learners, descriptive and pedagogical grammars do not normally aim at a general rule (Westney, 1994). From a simplified point of view, we could assume the existence of low and high level rules.

The second case concerned 3rd person singular morpheme. 9 students recognized the lack of morphemes in the incorrect sentences and seemed to be able to give an explicit explanation. This phenomenon usually takes time for students to acquire because it is the only morpheme found in English simple present tense. Even though the simple present is one of the first grammatical features taught to students, they do not seem to internalize it in the early stages of English learning. However, teachers usually focus on providing feedback when there is a lack of it. This constant correction seems to have led to acquisition. According to Green and Hetch (1992), it could be said that the 3rd person singular morpheme was an easily recognized category for upper-intermediate and advanced learners of English. The morphemes did not depend on large contexts within the test.

The third case concerned modal verbs. When students start studying the structure of modal verbs in English, three main characteristics are explained explicitly: I) they are always followed by an infinitive; 2) they never take "to" with the infinitive unless they follow these forms: have to, don't/doesn't/didn't have to, ought (not) to, need to or be able to; 3) they never take an –s with the 3rd person singular.

3 sets of modal structures were presented to students following the 3 rules mentioned above. 6 students provided an explicit explanation of violation of rule I), 8 students did the same in relation to rule 2) and finally, 8 students in relation to rule 3). What follows from these results is that the vast majority of students had internalized these rules and

were able to give the correct explanations explicitly. Students are taught modal verbs progressively since they start learning English. However, explicit rules are normally repeated as an introduction to the revision of the topic, and consequently, students practice the same structures cyclically.

Students used "formula-like" explanations in some of their responses: *"modal verbs + infinitive = always, can + to inf. = incorrect; you don't use to"*. These kinds of rules could be related to pedagogical grammars in terms of their accessibility. It could also be pointed out that students' implicit explanations dealt with the functional notion of modal verbs, which could be considered more problematic in terms of rule assignment. Meaning distinction is related to several factors: mode, formality and variety, which might not be generalized in a simplified rule.

The fourth case concerned relative pronouns. Relative pronouns seemed to fulfill Green and Hetch's criteria. They were easily recognized by students, only one of the students chose an incorrect relative pronoun. These pronouns could also be applied mechanically - *"who is used for people, which is used for things"*- and they did not depend on large contexts. Explicit explanations were once again used in most cases. Relative structures have very little variation in English, it could be said that there are no exceptions to the rules. Therefore, students found that information easy to acquire and store.

The fifth case concerned conditional structures. They seemed somehow problematic both when students had to select the correct option and when they had to provide an explanation for its ungrammaticality. None of the students could give an explicit rule which accounted for the formation of first and second conditional types. Although conditional structures could be applied mechanically, students preferred to explain them in terms of the situation presented - *"it's a desire and it isn't true, it will never happen..."*- This situation may have occurred due to the fact that conditional structures are not taught in the early stages of English learning, as opposed to the former structures, which students could have automatized through recurrent practice and the repetition of the rule since the beginning of their learning process, as with the 3rd person singular or the non pro-drop phenomena. Students needed more practice to recognize the grammaticality or ungrammaticality of conditional structures which could have led them to a better understanding of its technical formation.

It could also be assumed that conditional structures might have multiple combinations of tense and structure. Even if students were only asked to recognize the first and second types, their knowledge of the whole theory could have led them to a certain insecurity of the more simple structures.

It is important to highlight here that although correct sentences previously produced by students were selected to form the tests, incorrect conditional structures were also produced orally in a higher number of instances than in the rest of structures. There seems to be a correlation, in a high percentage of the cases, between producing a wrong sentence orally, selecting an ungrammatical sentence for that grammatical feature and giving an implicit explanation for it.

The sixth case concerned gerunds. Students were only given two possibilities: a verb followed by -to infinitive or the same verb followed by a gerund. 5 of the 10 students were aware of the situation presented and gave an explicit response. 2 of the 10 did not provide any answer and the rest gave the opposite rule e.g. *"to be used to do something"*. Although these responses were grammatically incorrect, they had tried to give an explicit explanation for the rule and, thus, it could be said that students knew something about the rules for verbs followed by gerund or infinitive.

From these results, we could say that gerunds were easily recognized categories but the explicit rules for its use could not be applied mechanically in all cases. This may show that it is easy to confuse rules, which only have two possible options. Apart from verbs of like and dislike which are taught at early stages, further constructions with gerunds or infinitives are not repeated frequently in the learning process. Although these kinds of structures only require a memorization process, students seemed to have difficulties to remember all of them.

Furthermore, some of these structures might allow both the infinitive and the gerund, depending on the situation presented. This could make this grammar rule even more difficult to internalize. Some authors (Pullum and Zwicky, 1991) argued for the possibility of creating grammatical rules blocking certain combinations. From a pedagogical point of view, this assumption could help learners to acquire some

grammatical features; however, in terms of acquisition cut rules or explanations might not be over-valued.

To sum up, the discussion of the data showed that the participants of this study preferred to use explicit explanations for those structures which had been internalized through practice in the learning process. It seemed that students had acquired a high level of conscious awareness of most of the grammatical English structures studied explicitly throughout their instruction. Therefore, explicit explanations were given to rules that students had already learnt from a pedagogical or descriptive point of view.

On the contrary, students relied on their implicit knowledge when they lacked the accurate terms to explain the phenomenon. In these cases, the rules provided by students were considered of limited validity due to the fact that they could not be applied mechanically and universally. Students seemed to have problems to provide explicit rules when they had problems to produce those structures correctly. Hence, implicit explanations were mostly used when the accurate rules had not been internalized.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was first to analyze if L2 learners of English were able to provide explicit explanations for the grammatical structures that they had correctly used in their oral performance and, therefore, to study whether form-focused instruction helped L2 learners of English to explain the grammatical structures that they use correctly in spontaneous speech. According to the results obtained in the study, it seemed that the majority of students could provide an explicit explanation for those rules which had been repeated since the early stages of L2 learning and, thus, internalized. There were few grammatical structures that were explained only implicitly.

From a pedagogical point of view, it could be said that explicit grammar instruction, which is developed gradually through practice in the learning process, does have an effect in SLA. It seemed that students tended to make use of their explicit knowledge when the grammatical structures were accurately internalized.

According to the data analyzed in this study, some grammatical rules could be explained as simple structures. Moreover, many students seemed to be able to make use of these structures when discussing metalinguistic descriptions. This metalinguistic awareness could help students to understand the L2 grammatical features they are exposed to in the input and make use of them in their own production. It could also be said that explicit grammar instruction helps the learning process in general due to the fact that it could make students feel more secure and confident about what they produce. Therefore, teachers should devote some classroom time to explicit instruction.

Although explicit instruction does seem to have an effect, it is also very important that L2 learners are also exposed to the English language in the classroom. Form-focused approaches might speed up conscious awareness about the language and formal accuracy whereas meaning-based approaches may give the opportunity to communicate in the L2, which remains rare outside the classroom in non-naturalistic settings.

Regarding the limitations of this study, it could be pointed out that there were few grammatical structures analyzed so as to make a proper generalization to the acquisition of all English grammar rules by L2 learners. Those structures analyzed coincided with what they had produced orally in order to make an analysis of what learners could first produce correctly and then, explain explicitly.

Another limitation found was that the structures analyzed in the tests were very simple for upper-intermediate and advanced learners of English. As we have seen, the majority of these structures had been internalized during the learning process. However, we might not generalize these results to more complex structures with higher levels of proficiency.

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