

Which Forms Should Be Taught Explicitly? A Theoretical Framework

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Abstract

Few topics in SLA are as contentious as grammar teaching. Differences in opinion persist about whether, what, and when grammar should be taught explicitly. While most SLA researchers now agree that acquisition is primarily a subconscious process, there is a good deal of empirical evidence suggesting that it can be accelerated through explicit teaching, provided forms are presented in a way that respects the natural order of acquisition. Among proponents of explicit instruction, few believe it is feasible or desirable to teach all forms, but there is great disagreement regarding which forms should be taught. This advice provides little practical direction for practitioners and policymakers wondering whether and when to teach a particular form explicitly in their classrooms. This article proposes a framework for a tool called the Implicit/Explicit Knowledge Axis which could be developed to provide critical guidance on the matter.

Key words: SLA, grammar, explicit instruction, language teaching methods, TESOL

Introduction

There has been considerable debate in the field of second language teaching over the years as to whether or not grammar should be taught explicitly (Daloglu, 2020; Ellis, 2006), and, if so, what grammar should be taught (Silva & Roehr-Brackin, 2016). While there has been a great deal of research, not all studies are conclusive, and many can be interpreted in different ways. This means advocates of both skill-building and the zero-grammar approach—and those with more nuanced views falling between these two—are able to draw on empirical evidence to support their positions.

This lack of conclusive messaging from academia leaves practitioners and policymakers without clear guidance, and as a result they may gravitate towards whichever teaching method suits their personal preference. In the words of Schenck (2018): “[P]olarization of language educators toward ideological extremes may have precluded identification of a necessary balance between emphasis on grammatical accuracy and promotion of communication” (p. 225). The following is an attempt to apply the preponderance of evidence from empirical studies to create a tool which practitioners and policymakers can consult when deciding if and when to teach particular grammatical rules or forms.

Controversies

Should grammar be taught?

Perhaps the most influential argument against explicit grammar instruction arose from research that found students acquired grammatical forms in a set order, regardless of the order in which they were instructed. The conclusion drawn by some theorists (e.g. Felix, 1981; Krashen, 1982), was that grammatical forms are picked up subconsciously, meaning explicit instruction is not necessary for acquisition. Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (1982) states that grammar is acquired naturally when students are exposed to comprehensible input—messages they understand. Krashen suggested that the role of language teachers was to provide students with comprehensible input in a low-anxiety environment, and that explicit instruction was neither necessary nor desirable. Krashen’s view was supported by empirical evidence which found that instruction only affected acquisition superficially, temporarily, or negatively (Lightbown, 1983). Other studies suggested explicit instruction could affect the types of errors that students make. For example, Pica (1983) found that instructed students were more likely to make overgeneralization errors (universally applying rules where they are not appropriate), whereas non-instructed students were more likely to omit necessary morphemes.

The above research led to the development of several pedagogical methods which focused on meaning rather than form, such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). In the strong version of CLT, students are not instructed in grammar at all. Learners in such programs have been found to develop strong comprehension (Genesee, 2004) and communication skills (Lightbown, Halter, White, & Horst, 2002).

However, there are theorists who argue that explicit grammar still has a place in second language teaching. Ellis (2006) completed a thorough review of the literature and concluded, with numerous caveats, that “teaching grammar works” (p.102). There are also two well-known meta-analyses that support the explicit teaching of grammar (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Spada & Tomita, 2010); however, some question the validity of the studies included in these analyses since they tend to test explicit knowledge rather than implicit knowledge, which is generally believed to be responsible for proficiency (Spada, 2014). In other words, teaching students grammar helps them to know about grammar, but does not help them to use it.

Long (1988) argued that while evidence suggested language could be acquired simply through exposure to comprehensible input, that did not mean it was the best or most efficient method. He likened this attitude to the suggestion that because plants can grow in the desert, one need not water one's plants at home, and he argued that instruction improved the efficiency of SLA. This view was based on the finding that explicit instruction could accelerate acquisition under certain circumstances (Pienemann, 1982/4). Pienemann's (1989) Teachability Hypothesis suggests that teaching a grammatical form can yield benefits if the student is ready to acquire it; in other words, if they have acquired all the forms which come before it in the natural order of acquisition. Teaching forms in a way that does not respect the learner's natural order of acquisition does not benefit the student. Lichtman and VanPatten (2021) suggest that many supporters of explicit instruction over the decades have ignored the fact that the order of acquisition is not impacted by the order of instruction.

What grammar should be taught?

While the debate over whether to teach grammar explicitly continues, researchers also cannot agree on what forms are the best candidates for instruction. It is generally acknowledged that the whole grammar of a language cannot be taught due to finite class time (Ellis, 2006) and the fact that linguists have not yet identified the entirety of the grammar of any language (Krashen, 2013). This means that instruction must necessarily be selective. While Krashen (1982) argued that instruction should be limited to "simple" forms, some believe that "complex" forms are better candidates (Ellis, 2006; Hulstijn & de Graaf, 1994; Schenck, 2018), whereas DeKeyser (2003) suggests middle-difficulty forms should be taught. Meanwhile, there is even disagreement about what constitutes a simple or a complex form (Scheffler, 2009). While some researchers specify how they define complexity (e.g. Schenck, 2018), others do not clearly state whether they consider a form difficult because it is late acquired or because it is hard to explain, or because it is hard to transfer explicit knowledge to implicit knowledge. This ambiguity is problematic given that "forms that are easy to learn may be hard to acquire, while forms that are difficult to learn may be easy to acquire" (Han & Lew, 2012, p. 198).

Some researchers avoid classifying forms by having students rate the "difficulty" of the form (e.g. Han & Lew, 2012), or by suggesting that forms should be evaluated based on how many errors users make (Ellis, 2006). These practical approaches to a theoretical problem are appealing, but it could lead to late-acquired forms being rated as more difficult since students at varying stages of development would be more likely to have difficulty with, or make errors on, forms they have not yet acquired. This could be avoided if, as some suggest, researchers seeking to identify problematic structures examine the "endstate" grammars of proficient L2 speakers whose language has fossilized (Han & Lew, 2012, p. 212).

A working model for deciding which grammar should be taught

Theoretical grounding

Given that so many theories of SLA offer conflicting guidance on explicit grammar instruction, it is impossible to design a tool that satisfies every view. For the purposes of this project, the author attempts to find common ground among some theories that have garnered significant backing from within the academic community. By striking a balance between various hypotheses, it is hoped that this model will avoid alienating practitioners from different camps and perpetuating the lack of consensus that has been observed in the past. Furthermore, the basic framework is designed to be flexible enough to be used by practitioners holding different views.

The model is predicated on the assumption that the basic tenets of the Input Hypothesis, the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, and the Natural Order Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) are accurate, in that learning and acquisition are distinct processes, that communicative competence is the result of acquisition, and that forms are acquired in a (more or less) standard sequence. These hypotheses are now generally acknowledged among experts in the field to be “irrefutable observations about second language acquisition” (Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021), and are thus a solid foundation upon which to build the current model.

As there is still a great deal of controversy regarding whether or not explicit knowledge can become implicit knowledge, the current model takes a middle road grounded in a weak interface view (Ellis, 1993), which suggests that explicit knowledge of forms can accelerate acquisition even if a direct transformation of knowledge type is not possible. This weak interface view provides a plausible explanation for the finding that explicit instruction can accelerate acquisition, but does not alter the order of acquisition (Pienemann, 1982/4). This discovery led to the formulation of the Teachability Theory—also a grounding for the current model—which suggests that explicit instruction of grammatical features that respects the natural order has the potential to accelerate acquisition, but that explicit instruction of forms out of order can impede progress (Pienemann, 1989).

Finally, the model also addresses problems identified by the Fossilization Hypothesis which suggests learners stop acquiring new forms at some point, even under optimum conditions (Selinker, 1972), and it takes into consideration the taxonomy of implicit and explicit learning difficulty (Roehr & Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2009).

Design

The Implicit/Explicit Knowledge Axis (henceforth IEKA) is a chart consisting of four quadrants separated by two axes (see Table 1). The x-axis is the Implicit Knowledge Axis (IKA), and the y-axis is the Explicit Knowledge Axis (EKA). This basic design is intended to be a framework which can be further developed and updated as new evidence becomes available.

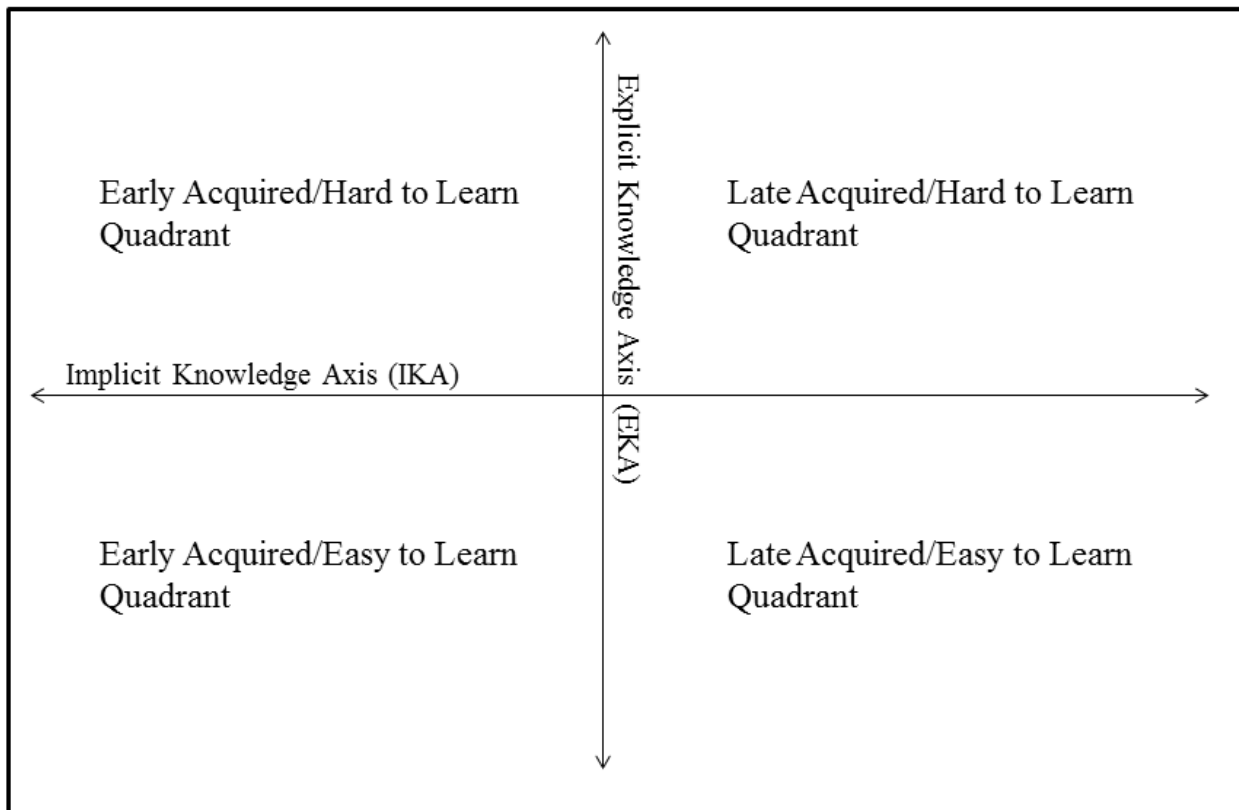
On the IKA, forms are plotted in sequence according to their natural order of acquisition, as described in the Natural Order Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981). Early acquired forms would be plotted on the left side of the axis, with later acquired forms being added progressively farther to the right. To illustrate, we can use Krashen’s (1981, p. 59) rough classification of forms to suggest an approximate position on the IKA of some commonly observed morphemes. At the left we would see the ‘ing’ suffix, the plural ‘s’, and copula; farther to the right would be auxiliary verbs and articles, followed by the irregular past tense, and then finally the regular past, the third-person singular ‘s’, and the possessive ‘s’. At the very right of the axis would be forms with a high degree of what Han and Lew (2012) term “acquisitional complexity”, in that they cannot be acquired without explicit instruction, and are thus prime candidates for fossilization. The work of plotting the position of grammatical forms would be ongoing, given that not all grammatical forms have been identified, and not all identified forms have been classified according to their position in the natural order of acquisition (Krashen, 2013).

The EKA intersects the IKA at the mid-point, dividing the grid into four quadrants. Grammatical points would be plotted on the EKA based on how likely it is that explicit knowledge can be obtained, retained, and applied, with the possibility that it could—given a weak interface view—aid in the acquisition of implicit knowledge. While all grammatical points can theoretically be explicitly learned, they have varying levels of learning difficulty. In order to determine the position of forms on the EKA, we might look to the criteria set out in Roehr and Gánem-Gutiérrez’s (2009) taxonomy of implicit and explicit learning difficulty. This taxonomy suggests criteria that can be used to judge the learning

difficulty of various forms. While the implicit learning difficulty would presumably more or less agree with the natural order of acquisition (third person ‘s’ is judged difficult to acquire), the explicit learning difficulty factors would be relevant to the position on the EKA. High conceptual complexity and high technicality of the meta-language, for example, are posited to increase explicit learning difficulty, whereas high truth value—fewer exceptions—reduces explicit learning difficulty.

One example of a rule that would rank high on the EKA due to complexity, presumably, would be the order of adjectives in English. This rule is so complex that Meerman and Tamaoka (2008) list no fewer than nine texts offering different views regarding the canonical rules for correct order. Nonetheless, it is possible to teach some version of the rule to students and have them be able to understand the knowledge explicitly and produce it correctly, in the short term (Meerman & Tamaoka, 2008); however, remembering the order and the hierarchy of competing rules would prove extraordinarily challenging in the long run. In fact, the study cited above showed that students who had been taught the rules previously and those who had not, performed the same when tested.

Table 1: Implicit/Explicit Knowledge Axis (IEKA)



As for rules that would score high in terms of difficulty on the EKA due to low reliability, one example would be the irregular past tense. Each irregular form must be rote memorized if it is to be learned explicitly rather than acquired. With a couple of hundred irregular verbs in English, this act of explicit learning would cause a tremendous strain on the memory.

Conversely, there are some grammatical points which are absolutely simple to learn, like the third-person ‘s’. This rule could be taught and learned in a single lesson. The fact that many language

learners fail to implement the rule in their production is not a symptom of it being difficult to learn, but rather that it is a late-acquired form. Most students who fail to apply the morpheme, know the rule. As such, while this rule would be far to the right on the IKA, it would be rated as low difficulty on the EKA.

As with plotting positions on the IKA, finding the appropriate spot on the EKA would also be a work in progress. However, eventually, many grammatical forms would be plotted on the IEKA, with each occupying a space in one of the four quadrants, which we can identify as early-acquired/easy-to-learn, early-acquired/hard-to-learn, late-acquired/easy-to-learn, and late-acquired/hard-to-learn. This leaves us with the question of which points we should teach explicitly, and when.

Using the tool

One basic tenet of this system must be that no grammatical point should be taught out of sequence. Students will proceed from left to right along the IKA as they progress along the natural order. Teaching forms out of order does not speed acquisition, and may even cause damage (Pienemann, 1989), a fact often ignored by more recent proponents of explicit instruction (Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021). It should be noted that a student's position on the IKA will change, and is different for each student; there will be no movement on the EKA. This is in keeping with the hypothesis that learning difficulty is based on factors unrelated to the student, whereas acquirability is very much connected to a student's stage of development (Han & Lew, 2012).

To use the IEKA, teachers should identify their student's present position on the IKA and then move from left to right, respecting the natural order of acquisition, as the student acquires the forms. However, not all forms along the IKA will benefit from explicit instruction. The IEKA offers the flexibility for individual teachers to set their own threshold of when in a student's progress along the IKA explicit instruction begins bearing fruit, and which position of a form on the EKA qualifies it as a suitable candidate. Practitioners who lean more towards a strong view of CLT might restrict explicit instruction to a few forms at the far right of the IKA that are candidates for fossilization, whereas others might favour an earlier start. Similarly, instructors will have the flexibility of deciding whether to restrict explicit instruction to forms that fall on the low, middle, or high end of the EKA. Finally, student priorities would also affect how wide a net to cast. In situations where the learners' priority is accuracy rather than communicative ability, such as students who are mostly interested in passing a high-stakes exam, or whose main goal is writing professional communications, explicit instruction might extend farther up or down the EKA than in the case of students who want to acquire the language chiefly for daily communication.

It is suggested that forms falling in the two early acquired quadrants should not be taught explicitly (regardless of the form's position on the EKA). This is based on the following reasoning. First, the students at this early stage of development have limited proficiency in English, which means the explanation of grammatical rules will likely be incomprehensible if delivered in the target language. Therefore, in ESL contexts, where students lack a common language, explicit instruction would be impossible. In FL classes where all the students share an L1, explicit instruction to beginners would theoretically be possible, provided the teacher is sufficiently proficient in the L1; however, in general, early-stage learners would do better left purely to acquisition, being presented with caretaker language—content focusing on the physical here and now—rather than abstract grammatical instruction. Since these early forms are easily acquirable, students should be able to pick them up without difficulty. Ellis (2002, 2006) supports a later start to grammar instruction and suggests grammar should start being taught when the learner is at the intermediate-plus level of development.

Furthermore, one must consider the psychological factors, such as Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE), and their long and short-term impact on language learners. Language classes should always be enjoyable and engaging, but this is presumably especially true in the early formative phases when students are still developing their attitudes towards the language. Keeping classes fun and interesting is critical to building FLE (Dewaele, Witney, Saito, & Dewaele, 2017). Teachers who center classes on grammar instruction might struggle to capture the interest of students (Krashen, 2013).

Once the students reach the midpoint on the IKA, the forms they encounter will fall in the late-acquired/easy to learn, and the late-acquired/hard to learn quadrants. At this point in a student's development, instruction may be an option, but the guidance given about forms found in these two quadrants is somewhat ambiguous, given that theorists hold different views on this issue.

Nevertheless, the framework is flexible enough to be used by practitioners holding different views. Those who support prioritizing easy-to-learn forms can teach forms found in the late-acquired/easy-to-learn quadrant, those who support prioritizing the teaching of hard-to-learn forms would focus on forms found in the late-acquired/hard-to-learn quadrant, whereas those who subscribe to DeKeyser's (2003) view that middle-difficulty forms are the most suitable candidates for instruction could focus on the forms that fall closer to the mid-point of the EKA, avoiding those at the extremes.

Potential criticisms

It is likely that there cannot be a universal IEKA, as it will have to be modified to suit learners who have different L1s. This is because L1s have been found to have an influence on the natural order of acquisition in an L2 (Murakami & Alexopoulou, 2016), as well as on which forms are candidates for fossilization (Han & Lew, 2012). This would naturally require changes in order along the IKA. Furthermore, it is likely that students with various L1s would experience different levels of challenges in explicitly learning various forms as well. Certainly a speaker of Mandarin will find more English forms more challenging than a speaker of Dutch or German would. This is not a prohibitive problem in an EFL context where every student in the class speaks the same language, but it would cause considerable logistical problems in ESL classes where students have a variety of different L1s.

Other criticisms would be in line with those aimed at any explicit grammar instruction, such as that in order to explicitly teach grammar that qualifies as $i+1$, it is necessary that everyone in the class be at the same level, or that explicit grammatical instruction places constrictions on interest (Krashen, 2013). These are all valid concerns. The IEKA is not intended to sway practitioners away from CLT towards explicit instruction, but rather to provide a framework so that those who do choose to teach explicitly do it in the most effective way possible.

Conclusion

Since researchers disagree on so many key aspects of explicit grammar instruction, those responsible for educating students are left without much guidance on the issue. The IEKA is designed to help practitioners and policymakers decide which forms should be taught explicitly, and when. It is hoped that the basic structure conforms to the most commonly held views in SLA, but given the hotly contested nature of the debate, it can be used flexibly by practitioners who hold different views on aspects which are not yet settled. Since research on the natural order as well as on the difficulty of explicit learning is on-going, the details of the framework need to be added as they emerge. This paper calls for a collaborative effort among SLA researchers to flesh out the rough framework by plotting grammatical forms on their appropriate positions along the EKA and IKA.

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Ethics Statement

I, hereby, state that I have conducted the research and prepared the manuscript following the protocol of research and publications ethics. I am solely responsible if any deviation or mistake (in content and language) is identified in the manuscript.

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