Explicit vs. Implicit Exposure to Grammar: Complexity and Accuracy in Negation and Interrogatives

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to report the processes happening to two participants developing their interlanguage. Most of the focus is on the acquisition of negation and question forms. It is reported how accurate and complex the negatives and questions they produce are. Some other interesting points other than negatives and questions are referred to during the discussion. All these are done comparatively since one of these participants is exposed to explicit grammar rules while the other one is not exposed to any predetermined explicit grammar rule. Results indicated that the one explicitly exposed to grammar comes with more accuracy and speed of speech while the other one comes with less accuracy and longer pauses in speech and, in return, more structurally complex sentences he comes to.

Keywords: explicit vs. implicit exposure, grammar, complexity, accuracy, negation, interrogatives

INTRODUCTION

To date, and during the history of language teaching and its emergence as an independent field of study, a lot of studies have been done on the order of acquisition both in first and second language acquisition. In spite of the great number of these studies, it is today in its continuous process. Most of them have put their focus on specific parts. One of the interesting parts which has been able to draw the attention of researchers in this field is the developmental learning of learners in interlanguage phase both in first and second langue acquisition (Berko 1988; Brown 1973; Lightbown & Spada 2006). The works done by these researchers are all in first language acquisition, but all these kinds of researches and studies are to do something with second language acquisition. Second language acquisition is also under investigation. English learners with first language acquirers of English and with each other (Comrie2003; Eckman 2007; Kanno 2007).

The majority of these studies advocate the existence of a similar order of morpheme acquisition both in first and second language acquisition. For the truth of this, we can refer to typological universals which are stemmed from the work of Greenberg in 1963.

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However, different speed rates in learning exist among learners due to differences in age, gender, and social level, explicit or implicit use of grammar. But how different? This is not as agreed-upon as other areas mentioned previously.

This is one side of the coin; there exist many controversies on the other side of the coin. One source of these differences and controversies can be due to explicit or implicit exposure to grammar rules. To understand more about the real outcomes of the two methods, this qualitative study was done to comparatively deal with different issues might happen to two adult Iranian learners-one being exposed to explicit rules of grammar and the other one without any preplanned exposure to explicit rules of grammar.

Hereby, in this study, the differences relating to the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of negative and interrogative sentences between the two learners will be reported and discussed. Therefore, with regard to the fact that most of studies have focused on the morpheme order of acquisition and less time has been devote to some other issues such as the complexity and accuracy of structures, this case study attempts to address the two research questions:

1) How accurate are the interrogative and negative sentences developed when learners are exposed to explicit grammar rules and corrective feedback vs. implicit one?

2) How different is the complexity of structures produced by those being exposed to explicit grammar rules and corrective feedback from that of those being exposed to implicit exposure to grammar rules?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Explicit vs. implicit grammar learning has been hotly debated during the history of ELT (Reber, 1976, 1993; Reber & Allen, 1978). As Eleni Ziori and ZoltanDienes (2012) clarify the concept of implicit and explicit learning

Learning is implicit when people acquire knowledge, they are not conscious of, and thus cannot express verbally. In that sense, implicit learning contrasts with explicit learning, which often depends on the use of hypothesis-testing strategies and results in knowledge one is conscious of. (p. 1)

 Eleni Ziori and ZoltanDienes (2012) in their research found support for explicit learning of grammar in a way that explicit exposure to grammar and explicit correction add to the existing knowledge of learners while implicit type does not increase the present knowledge as much as explicit one, they found that implicit exposure to learning keeps the linguistic knowledge unchanged or sometimes even decreases the present level of learners' linguistic knowledge. On the other hand, another group of researchers believe in the late and long-term effectiveness of implicit types of learning (Anderson, 1983; Lewis & Anderson, 1985). This group of researchers believes that at early stages, learners benefit more from explicit learning and therefore short-term and more tangible rates of progression can be observed in learners. They argue that this explicit knowledge is a necessary condition for successful performance on a task.

However, there are other researchers who claim that there is no need for even prior exposure to explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge just suffice for the successful acquisition of language (Berry & Dienes, 1993; Cleeremans & Jiménez, 2002; Fu, & Dienes, 2008). The support they claim for the adequacy of their findings is of input frequency or more technically salience the learners are exposed to.

In contrast, Dabaghi and Basturkmen in 2009 found support for explicit exposure and explicit feedback. They did their study on Iranian English learners in an experimental study. Of course, their study was more dealt with reading and then narrating a written text in which those provided with explicit rules of grammar performed more successfully. Their findings show that explicit learning of grammar makes learners aware of the gaps they are in compared to their present interlanguage and the standard forms. This will result in restructuring and the use and acquisition of correct forms.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

As mentioned before, two participants, namely Arian and Navid participated in this study. Both of them were male first-semester students of MA at Tarbiat Modares University. They were both twenty-four years old, and both motivated instrumentally for the attainment of academic goals. Navid was self-studying grammar rules and listening to the English audio clips per day before taking treatment. About thirty days he had a ten-minute conversation with the researcher every day and these conversations were being recorded. On the other hand, Arian had no predetermined studying before taking part in the conversation. In return, the intensity of treatment was greater for him than Navid in a way that the length of each daily conversation for him was about forty-five minutes. But the conversation he took part in was among three other peers in addition to the researcher. The input Arian was exposed to, hence, was higher. Navid who studied grammar by himself was supposed to be provided with corrective feedback while Arian was supposed to be provided with feedback whenever he sought help.

The reason for the selection of Arian among the four learners in that group was the more similarities he shared with Navid in that both of them seemed to be of relatively same level of linguistic knowledge and both of them were of the same native language backgrounds, i.e. Persian and Turkish (their heritage language).

Instrumentation and procedure

Navid's dialogue and conversation with the researcher was recorded via mobile phone and MP3 player. The same was done for Arian. About five weeks, this procedure was followed. It should be noted that the treatment and recording were done during six days per week.

The topic of discussion and conversation were selected with the agreement of the participants and the other members of the group at the beginning of each session. By this strategy, the possibility of learners' studying on specific themes of discussion was lowered and, hence, the naturalness of the data increased. When data collection came to an end, all the negative and interrogative sentences each participant had uttered during

their speaking were transcribed. With the help of descriptive analysis and exemplifying some prominent samples the participants used, the research questions were tried to be dealt with and some other unexpected events were explored and reported in the discussion part.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Since the interaction Arian has been involved in was of more communicative and, say, meaning-based nature rather than grammar-based, it seems that more progress can be observed in terms of communication and the transferring of meaning. This matter will become more evident when he is provided with corrective feedback by the teacher in some limited situations, and in consequence he pays no attention to what is being said. In most of such cases, he just continued his speech without even the least attention to what was said to him. Transcription of his speech reveals the truth of this claim. For example, most of the time he produced yes/no questions without any inversion. The only symbol to lead the interlocutors to understand it as a sentence was his questioning voice. Being provided with the correct form, he just repeated back his original incorrect form. This can be due to the degree of certainty he has already acquired regarding the meaningfulness and understandablness of his sentences. It is in line with the work of Eleni Ziori and Zoltan Dienes in 2012 that found the lack of accuracy progress in those exposed to just the implicit types of feedback and grammar.

Referring to the percentage of correct structures of both Navid and Arian may clarify it more. Having a look at Navid's first session revealed that about 50% of his questions and just about 33% of his negative sentences were structurally correct while this percentage in the last session were about 66% and 71% respectively. Therefore, accuracy progress in Navid is observable both in question making and negative making.

However, Arians first session is marked with 50% correctness of negation. In the first session he just asked 2 questions that one of them was structurally correct and the other one was wrong. This degree doesn't undergo any tangible change in the last session although statistics report some progress in negation and retrogression in questions. His correct negative sentences in the last session were about 57%. Again, he just produced 2 interrogative sentences both of which were structurally inaccurate this time.

Another possible justification for this can be relatable to the nature of group conversation. In groups containing peers owning the similar levels of linguistic knowledge, this kind of security is more guaranteed. Of course, this security sometimes harms more rather than helps. Interacting in groups with such peers will direct the conversation and discussion toward meaningful conversation in a way that they will just seek to come to some conclusion in their debates, i.e. something more than linguistic content which is beyond the language. In such cases, they even forgot even their goal and focus that is language learning in a way that they even ignored their teacher and looked at him as a peer. For example, in one case, when the teacher was giving his personal comment on the topic of discussion, he just answered back: "you don't know nothing about it. Don't speak please". Again this can return to the friendship had already been established between Arian and the teacher. Perhaps, being in groups, gives more

confidence and sometimes a kind of overconfidence which seems to be destructive rather than constructive. However, Navid never behaved so despite sharing the same degree of friendship with the teacher. Navid, in contrast to Arian, was more accurate in his sentences and tended to seek more helps from the teacher. Even when his sentences were both grammatically and meaningfully correct, he asked feedback of course in Persian.

Arian just sought help when he lacked a lexical word and he rarely sought help for grammatical. This again supports the assumption meaning-oriented and he reached a level of stabilization in grammar areas. For instance, in one case he produced: "In your exam [pause], example, we we (he seeks help for the word consider) consider the situation for a ugly girl. What's your sense?" However in making his speech accurate, he rarely tended to seek help as in "we are don't need search about (seeking help for the word conduct), good conduct or power… ." In this example, he again asked for word choosing but no clarification did he ask for negation albeit knowing his negation was grammatically problematic.

During transcription, it was revealed that Arian made use of some specific interrogative and negative forms correctly. Interestingly he faced difficulty producing the sentences of the same structure with different words included. Returning to him and asking him about that revealed some interesting facts. As some questions like "what's your name?", "how are you?", "what's the name of village?", etc. had been produced fluently and even without a bit of thought and of course accurately, he was, after the end of the treatment, asked the reason for grammaticality of these questions and the ungrammaticality of questions with similar structures and patterns. The reply he provided the researcher with led us to conclude almost certainly that these limited patterns had been already familiar to him. These are some prefabricated patterns structures; therefore, they have not created these patterns based on organized grammar rules. These patterns have been already dealt with by participants in some obligatory courses they had to pass in guidance and high-school periods.

So, based on Lightbown (1983), the danger of U-shaped learning is strengthened here. This kind of learning refers to the process by which the learner is first able to produce the correct patterns but s/he is not aware of the grammar rules dominant over the structures. After getting aware of the rules, the learners deviate hesitantly from their first correct structures. With the passage of time, hence, it seems that they progress again toward the correct version. If this is going to happen in our case, it will take too much time based on the little progress was found in grammatical points during the treatment.

Another point attracted the eye was the number and length of pauses the participants made use of differently in their speech. The number of pauses and correction in Navid's speech was significantly more than Arian's. However, the length of these pauses in Navid was lower than Arian in a way that most of the pauses observed in Navid's speech took less than one second. Listening to Arian's recordings revealed his number of pauses less than Navid's, however, lengthier than Navid in a way that some of his pauses took even about three or four seconds while for Navid it was never found such instances. Arian, on the other hand, rarely tended to think back at his utterances and self-correct them while Navid did so more frequently in his talking. One possible reason for the greater number

of pauses in Navid's speech can be the attempts he made to produce accurate structures whereas for Arian accuracy was not of importance.

Dealing with complexity perspective, we find that Arian made use of more compound and complex sentences than Navid, but the structural accuracy was rarely observed in his talks. Transcribing some sentences from Arian can clarify the point more:

- *In some night, even they continue … (without any object) to Safar but no going to stay to Haram.

- *I see Mr. Arab is speaking very very easy and he haven't any problem.

Here some of compound sentences he had produced were inserted; it is seen that they are understandable while at the same time, grammatical mistakes are included in his sentences. The ungrammaticality remains also in his simple sentences even but there are grammatical simple sentences in his talks too:

- I don't select it.

- What's the name of the village?

- *I don't speaking in the first class.   *Instead of*   I didn't speak in the first class.

- *We we are don't need search about … power, literacy?

For Navid who was being exposed to explicit grammar, the story is somehow different. Navid tended to use simple sentences in his talks more frequently than compound and complex sentences. When facing difficulty, he showed sensitivity to accuracy by asking for the correct for even in Persian, English, or English and Persian simultaneously. The more complex and lengthier the sentences were getting for Navid, the more difficulty he would face. The structures are to undergo some changes when complexity is to be inserted in his talks. Looking at these examples might prove the strength of the point:

- *I can continue or I can open the window? (questioning voice)

- *I not remember for a good thing but ….

This procedure is dominant in his speech in a way that, in one of the sessions, he himself suggested: "we can speak simple. Our conversation is very difficult."

Another point worthy of mentioning here was the selection of topics. All the topics were selected base on the agreement of participants. In some exceptional cases that the researcher tried to initiate the conversation by such issues as language learning, teaching, and some other similar issues, they tried to skip the conversation even in the middle of hot debate. They even shift the topical conversation to their own areas of interest, major, etc. For example, some topics such as bodybuilding, sports, geography, and climatology were of interest for Navid, similarly for Arian, plant pathology, i.e. his major, religion, Islam, etc. were of priority. In sum, they showed great willingness in topics which they felt they are more knowledgeable than the researcher.

CONCLUSION

As supported by Eleni Ziori and ZoltanDienes (2012) explicit exposure to grammar is necessary for learning to happen. This gets more important when the content of learning is EFL and no opportunities do learners have to communicate outside. At least, we can claim that explicit exposure and explicit feedback can be more influential for short-term learning based on this study. Depending on our purpose, we can make our learners exposed to either explicit or implicit or both types of exposure to grammar. For example, if our purpose is to prepare our learners academically to enable them to lecture in academic settings, explicit type of grammar is recommended or at least some types of explicit grammar need to be included in teaching.

Nobody can understand the learners' needs better than themselves. They, hence, should be given freedom at least in some cases. These are learners who should feel motivated to learn. Motivation is not something to be imposed on learners by the teacher; rather, it should be discovered how to motivate them and practice it. As in this case, it was not possible even to have a free conversation on topics, say, related to language, since these were not the areas to which they were motivated.

Anyhow, similar types of research methodologically can be done with the focus put on the transfer patterns. For example, the results obtained from these participants revealed that there are some transfer patterns such as "I need *to* some ..." or "I hate *from* ...". Do problems in inversion and negation was repeatedly observed in the talks of participants. This again seems to be relatable to their mother tongue, i.e. Persian in which the addition of helping verbs for negation and interrogatives has no place. Or observing some structures as follows needs more clarification, to see whether or not these are universal or language specific, one possible hypothesis can be that these are the effects of native language since in Persian the order of structures are exactly like those in the followings:

- *can you signature on the book. [The sentence is declarative while the format is interrogative.]

- *We have money, can we have life, can we buy a car, can we.... [the same as above].

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