

# The Role of Explicit Knowledge in English Foreign Language Learning

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## Abstract

The study is to explore the role of explicit knowledge in English language learning. In this context, explicit knowledge refers to conscious linguistic knowledge (Yuichi and Robert 2017: 748). The study firstly introduces the definition and measurement of explicit knowledge. Then the relationship between explicit learning and explicit knowledge is articulated. Based on this, a variable competence model of second language development is given and fully illustrated with regard to attention to grammatical process. Finally, conclusions of explicit knowledge in English grammaticalization are summarized.

## Keywords

Explicit Knowledge, English Learning, Conscious Process, Grammaticalization, Competence

## I. Introduction

The role of explicit knowledge is of great importance in English foreign language learning. The relationship between explicit knowledge and explicit learning is one major issue in this field. Many studies are interested in figuring out the role of explicit knowledge in English foreign language learning through the competence model and the grammatical processing. In so doing, the definition of explicit knowledge is necessary to be well defined.

Explicit knowledge involves conscious linguistic knowledge, which is the kind of knowledge learned by people of all ages with their awareness of linguistic forms. In other words, explicit knowledge is the knowledge that can be articulated, accessed and verbalized. It can only be accessed through attentional processes as it exists as declarative facts. Explicit knowledge thus can be summarized by human beings with certain code systems among which the most typical is language. Mathematical formulas, diagrams, semaphore and other symbolic forms are also methods to express explicit knowledge. It serves like a “tool” to mediate performance. When learners are asked to judge the grammaticality in a task, typically they try to use declarative information to solve the problem.

Studies of explicit knowledge include knowledge such as phonology, lexicology, grammar, pragmatics, which are the aspects for learners to gain. Often, learners differ in depth and breadth of their foreign language learning process in explicit knowledge, and the process happens in human brain at a quick speed.

Because explicit knowledge is a mental phenomenon, it can only be measured through tests which explicit knowledge is activated. The measurement of explicit knowledge is accomplished by form-focused tasks, requiring the judgement of grammaticality. Most of the tests include three parts: to identify the ungrammatical parts of the sentences, to correct the sentences, and accurately state a rule. According to Rod Elis, language aptitude tests, grammaticality judgement tests (GJTs), and tests of metalanguage are three suitable ways to measure explicit knowledge.

In the language aptitude tests, learners' explicit knowledge is tested through how well they could analyze sentences and memorize meanings of vocabularies, which are closely related to language proficiency. Analyzing is an essential factor of learner's language aptitude since it is the ability to summarize the main idea of an article. For instance, given a reading material for comprehension, one who could have a quick and accurate understanding of the

gist is a high proficient language learner, which may be related to language aptitudes. However, language aptitudes measures one's language proficiency, which might not be the stored explicit knowledge in the brain. Green and Hecht (1992) gave a series of sentences with grammatical errors to 300 German school- and university-based learners of English. Learners were expected to correct each sentence and to point out the disobeyed rules. They discovered that learners could only state the correct rule in 46% of the sentences, while were able to correct 78% of the sentences. That is to say, the learners outperformed in correcting the errors rather than in explaining the rules. In this case, the issue needs to be investigated with regard to the whether the role of language sense plays an important role in helping them to correct these errors or it is explicit knowledge that is having a function in the process.

Explicit learning is of great significance in cognitive psychology and in second language research (SLA). Explicit learning is a process of learning complex regularities in which consciousness of linguistic features is included. In the process, memorizing facts and making prediction have a demand on working memory. Halliday (1970) analyses making prediction (which was called modality) in terms of functional diversity in language. He proposes that the category of modality concerns two related but different systems embodying different component of functions: modality (or modalization see Halliday 1994) and modulation. According to Halliday, modality expressing speaker's assessment of probability derives from the interpersonal function, one of the three meta-functions (the other two are ideational and textual function), in respect of which is closely related to capacity of working memory. It is an important form of participation whereby the speaker make himself/herself intrude or take up a position in the speech event. Furthermore, Halliday discusses the relationship between (epistemic) modality and polar, as well as tense, who argues naturally (epistemic) modality is always positive in that there never exists such things as negative probability, nor does it have the tense or voice of its own, since modality is out of the domain of content, only related to the speaker's memory. However, it can combine freely with all variants of tense, polarity and voice. In terms of the linguistic forms, modality can be expressed by either verbal auxiliary (e.g. must, may) or modal adjunct (adverbs, nominal, adjectival, verbal locutions) or the combination of them which forms a concord or cumulative effect in meaning. Contrary to modality, modulation, either characterizing the

relation of the participant to process (e.g. ability) or expressing the conditions on the process (e.g. permission and obligation), derives from ideational function. It is part of the content and deals with a different system from that of modality. It should be noted that, Halliday stresses despite of the difference in function, modality and modulation are closely related to each other in two aspects: one is that there is a semantic region, where interpersonal and ideational functions overlap; the other is that they can be expressed through some identical linguistic forms (verbal auxiliaries). To sum up, the “same but different” phenomenon of modality and modulation in terms of functional diversity in languages seems to be a prediction process related to the role of explicit language knowledge, in which working memory is involved.

## **II. Competence model of second language development**

As explicit learning is a more explicit process whereby various mnemonics, heuristics and strategies are engaged to induce a representational system. Its focus is methods in learning processes. Besides, learners are able to verbalize the things they had explicit learning. As Hulstijn (2002: 206) put it, ‘it is a conscious, deliberative process of concept formation and concept linking’. Many studies have been made to investigate the effect of explicit learning and to compare the results of explicit learning with implicit learning. However, the general finding is that explicit learning is more effective than implicit learning. Robinson (1996) reported that in terms of simple structure, explicit learners showed more excellence. Rosa and Neill (1999) concluded learners with high awareness in learning outperformed those with low awareness. Ellis (1993) reported that the most explicit group could verbalize the learned rules.

Learner’s competence in learning a second language is of great difference. Suppose that one learner’s storage of knowledge is closely related to how one is using the language. Then, different strategies the learner chooses reflect how he/she is constructing the discourse. Learners’ abilities to employ different strategies in learning language knowledge are crucial in developing the variability of language-learner language. There are two essential components in judging learner’s second language development: the knowledge of second language rules and how he/she uses this knowledge in different discourses through various strategies. The model of second language development proposed consists of (1) the account of the variable nature of language-learner language; (2) an explanation of this variability in terms of discourse processes; and (3) an explanation of variation in the rate of development in terms of individual learner differences and opportunity for the negotiation of meaning in discourse (Ellis, 1993). The variable competence model excels in its attention to the dynamic nature of second language development. It emphasizes the variability of learner’s knowledge and the language use. The three factors included in the SLD model show its advantages. Different developing patterns of learner’s language learning will have an impact on his/her language performance.

In describing learners’ output, vertical and horizontal variability should be considered. Vertical variability is concerned with a function of the level of formality in general language use, involving the use of alternative second language rules at any time in learners’ development. Vertical variability happens because of the different processes the learners go through relying on various discourses. While the horizontal variability is related to the changing pattern of the learner’s interlanguage system as time

passes by with its language learning. Horizontal variability results in using different processes in analyzing discourse. Hence, SLD can be explained by both vertical and horizontal variability in the construction of modeled speech occurring in the planned discourse or communicative speech occurring in the unplanned discourse. In a given communicative speech, one learner has to go through five stages of development: formula speech, propositionally reduced speech, syntactic utterances, morphologically marked utterances and complex utterances, which happens in a sequence. As for modeled speech, secondary processes such as monitoring and borrowing plays an important role, which helps activate one’s analytical knowledge. As for the rate of learners’ SLD, it is closely related to how the learner performs in unplanned discourse. Usually, one’s personality, background, and motivation may decide that whether or to what extent he/she will have a try in an unplanned discourse.

## **III. Attention to grammatical processing**

Grammaticalization is related to language changing process in which words represents objects and actions, mainly involving paying attention to the process of lexical and grammatical change. In other words, grammaticalization is concerned with the process in which a lexical word or word cluster loses some or all of its lexical meaning and serves to fulfill a more grammatical function. Since grammaticalization is a process, learners are not able to get control of it. The pedagogical procedures associated with consciousness-raising for the grammatical-process model are ones that arise naturally from the nature of grammaticalization itself. However, no two languages are the same concerning grammaticalization, so each language represents its own index of grammaticalization. For example, English has its strict grammar rule that every sentence must have a subject and there is a solid noun plus verb structure. Even though there is no propositional content to fill the place of a subject, we could fill it with “it” and “there”. For instance, the sentence it is snowing. The learner does not only learn the rigid fact of having a subject it, but also the fact that the different choices of subjects can result in various grammatical consequences for the rest of the sentence is snowing. The actual choice is governed by the discourse factors rather than the syntax. Since the skeleton of a sentence is constructed, then the proper determiner will interact with the grammar as well as the discourse. This process may constitute the foundation of raising learners’ grammatical consciousness. While learners’ lexical choices may be guided by the grammatical rule, they are also aware of the extra-grammatical factors that motivate the choices. The propositional-cluster principle shows the choices learners make in concern of concomitants of English grammaticalization. The concomitants include word order, syntactic-semantic distance, noun-to-verb ratio, coordination and subordination and so on.

## **IV. Conclusions**

The paper examines explicit knowledge which is learned with consciousness. Often in classes, teachers teach grammatical knowledge about word sequence, sentence, and syntax. Explicit knowledge could help make the learning more efficient by pointing out the direct rules rather than let the learner discover the rules by himself. Explicit learning is of great benefit as its can give a clear and concise view of how a new language functions. It is beneficial for second language learners to get their ideas of grammar in to shape rather than get lost in the wilderness of a new language. Memory should be taken into account when considering the

role of explicit knowledge in the process of grammaticalization. Language learning process differs from working memory capacity. For adults, explicit knowledge is of more necessity in learning a foreign language.

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