Form-focused instruction and the development of second language proficiency
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1 Introduction

The common way to talk about language is in terms of its grammar (Hulstijn, 2002). In fact, probably the most common conception of language is that it consists of a large set of lexical items and a set of rules, and if you are learning a second language, the task at hand is to learn to put the words and rules of a second language to proper use. Seeing language as a logically organised system of words and rules is not just a popular view; many linguists hold it too. Given the pervasiveness of the notion of language consisting of a finite set of rules, it is no more than logical that teaching grammar is an important component of second language instruction. Indeed, second language learning programmes, even those that are functionally and communicatively oriented, are invariably based on so-called pedagogical grammars: either overtly or covertly, they involve a structured approach to the presentation of the rules of grammar.

In fact, course books and resource books such as New ways in teaching grammar (Carswell Pennington, ed., 1995) testify to the countless different ways in which grammar can be taught, and a question that has concerned educators and researchers alike is how grammar should be taught to achieve second language proficiency. After all, the ability to use the second language (L2) fluently in speech and writing is the ultimate goal of any teaching effort. This question is especially pressing in the light of the oft heard complaint in pedagogy that grammar teaching does not lead to the changes in student behaviour sought for. Kwakernaak (1995), for example, expresses reservations about the value of practicing grammar rules in isolation in that there does not seem be any transfer to writing, let alone speaking. Similarly, Macrory and Stone (2000) demonstrated that their students, after four years of French, were able to score well on perfect tense gap-filling exercises. They were able to express this knowledge in terms of rule-like statements, too. However, performance in spontaneous discourse was poor, and did not reflect what they explicitly knew to be correct. This raises doubts as to the practical value of having conscious knowledge of the grammar of the L2 to becoming proficient.

This concern has been addressed by theories of instructed second language acquisition. These theories usually make a distinction between explicit and implicit linguistic knowledge, although different labels have sometimes been used (Bialystok, 1994b; DeKeyser, 1998; R. Ellis, 1990; 1994b; Krashen, 1981). Explicit
knowledge, also referred to as declarative or learned knowledge, denotes factual and conscious knowledge about the rules of the second language. Implicit knowledge, or procedural or acquired knowledge, refers to the knowledge that enables someone to use the second language appropriately in spontaneous situations of language use. In terms of explicit and implicit knowledge, the question is whether there can be an interface between explicit and implicit knowledge. Teaching and practising the rules of grammar in isolation seems a valuable experience only when explicit knowledge directly affects the acquisition or use of implicit knowledge, i.e., when there is an interface between explicit and implicit knowledge.

Within the field of second language acquisition, so-called form-focused instruction (FFI) research has put theories of instructed second language acquisition to the test, dealing with issues concerning the effectiveness of different types of instruction in different circumstances of learning. In a discussion of FFI, R. Ellis defines it as "any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form" (2001: p. 1/2). Although the majority of FFI studies have focused on the domain of grammar, the term form in form-focused instruction actually refers to all formal aspects of language: to grammar, but also to pronunciation, spelling, intonation, etc. It should also be pointed out that incidental in this definition is not the opposite of planned. Incidental FFI is equally planned, in that it is intentionally provided when communication problems incidentally arise. The term FFI, then, covers a broad range of activities all focusing the learner's attention on formal aspects of the L2.

FFI research dates back to the 1960's, and FFI has been a popular research topic throughout the years (2001). The picture that emerges from a number of reviews of FFI studies (Ellis, 1994b; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Lightbown, 2001; Long, 1983; Norris & Ortega, 2000) is first that FFI should be integrated in curricula that are primarily meaning-oriented, focusing on functional use of the L2 and communication. Another conclusion is that there is – at least to some extent – an interface between explicit and implicit knowledge, and that grammar should play a considerable role in second language learning programmes. Consequently, FFI research has moved from the question of whether FFI is effective to the investigation of what kinds of FFI are effective (Ellis, 2001). Currently, an issue of primary interest is how FFI can be adapted to promote input processing mechanisms. 'Focus on form' research, for example, investigates the value of shortly shifting the learner's attention to form during communication, based on the claim that the window of opportunity for effective
FFI is small (Doughty, 2001a; see: Doughty & Williams, eds., 1998). VanPatten’s ideas of Processing Instruction have also generated considerable interest (VanPatten, 1996; VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993; VanPatten & Sanz, 1995). His argument is that FFI should optimize L2 processing by informing learners about mismatches between their L1 and the L2. Finally, another research interest relates to how FFI interacts with numerous other variables, such as the nature of grammar structures, aptitude, L1 background, etc. (Norris & Ortega, 2000).

There are, however, a number of reasons to reconsider the yieldings of FFI research so far. Both Ellis (2001) and Hulstijn (1997) point out that despite the amount of attention FFI has received, it is still difficult to draw conclusions with a fair degree of certainty. The reason lies in the complexity of the FFI research agenda: many different methods of investigation have been used; few replicating studies have been done; and potentially intervening variables have been recognized or controlled for insufficiently. In addition, Norris and Ortega (2000) have demonstrated that FFI research has suffered from considerable bias: L2 progress has been assessed with measures of explicit knowledge much more than with measures of implicit knowledge. In a meta-analysis of FFI research, they synthesized the results of 49 FFI studies and found that the largest effects were generally obtained with explicit types of instruction. However, no more than eight studies included in the analysis measured progress by means of free constructed response tasks. On this note, Norris & Ortega remark about FFI research that “the measurement of change induced by instruction is typically carried out on instruments that seem to favour more explicit types of treatments by calling on explicit memory-based performance.” (p. 483). The implication of this research bias is that claims of superiority of explicit types of instruction over implicit types of instruction need to be reconsidered. As Doughty puts it: “the case for explicit instruction has been overstated.” (2003, p. 274).

This study assesses the importance of explicit knowledge resulting from explicit instruction to the development of second language proficiency. The experiment that this book reports on involved monitoring second language development of learners of Dutch as a second language receiving either explicit or implicit instruction about two grammar structures. Measures of both decontextualized and natural language performance were used to assess progress. The explicit instruction was designed to provide the language learners with conscious knowledge of the targeted grammar structures, while the implicit instruction was designed to expose the language learners to the target structures, so that the amount and nature of exposure to the target structures were equal.
between the compared groups. In doing so, both theoretical and practical purposes are served. Theoretically, the study addresses the interface issue and appraises claims regarding the presence or absence of an interface between explicit and implicit knowledge. In addition, this study serves to evaluate FFI research findings, and the extent to which conclusions drawn so far have been 'misguided' due to the already mentioned bias in measurement of progress. The practical value of this study is rather obvious: the question of how to integrate grammar teaching into second language learning programmes is still very much alive in everyday teaching. Knowledge about how L2 learners put explicit knowledge of the second language to use can provide important insights into curriculum design and the development of instructional material.

It should be pointed out that this study is not intended to evaluate the merits of a particular type of grammar instruction. In both pedagogy and research, a wide variety of different types of instruction have been used. However, throughout this book, only explicit and implicit instruction are contrasted. The terms explicit instruction and implicit instruction are used to refer to two types of instruction in which attention to form is either overt or covert. As soon as the instruction involves explanation of rules, or if learners are asked to discover rules, the instruction must be considered explicit. Conversely, when rules are not discussed and learners are not asked to attend to rules during L2 tasks, the instruction is implicit (Norris & Ortega, 2000). The most typical example of explicit instruction, and one which has often been used in form-focused instruction research, is traditional teacher-fronted rule explanation (e.g., DeKeyser, 1997). Another example of explicit instruction that has been investigated quite frequently is input processing and practise, which consists of tasks designed to promote or practise forms and their meanings (e.g., Salaberry, 1997; VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993). Flooding techniques (e.g., Williams & Evans, 1998) and input enhancement (e.g., Jourdenais, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson & Doughty, 1995; Trahey & White, 1993; White, 1998) in which forms are made salient through high frequent presentation or typographical enhancement (e.g., underlining) are the most notable examples of implicit FFI. It is possible to characterize instructional treatments further, for example according to their primary focus (e.g., Norris & Ortega, 2000). However, as the goal is to compare and contrast explicit and implicit instruction rather than specific types of instruction, no further distinctions will be made throughout this report.

The organisation of this book is straightforward. Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical likelihood of and empirical evidence for the presence of an interface
between explicit and implicit knowledge. The interface debate itself is outlined; it is evaluated in the light of recent developments in SLA theory; and FFI research findings are scrutinized in search of support for claims related to the interface issue. In Chapter 3, research questions are proposed based on the analysis of the interface issue. In addition, the design and organisation of the experiment conducted are expounded. In Chapter 4, the findings are presented, and these are discussed in Chapter 5.