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Effectiveness of explicit vs. implicit L2 instruction

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Chapter 7
Conclusion and recommendations

This dissertation compared the effects of two different types of L2 instruction implemented in the Netherlands: one being predominantly explicit, focusing on communicative skills with an explicit explanation of linguistic rules, and one being predominantly implicit, focusing on communicative skills with lots of frequent, authentic input and no focus on rules. The comparison regarded the oral and written skills of high school pupils, beginners in L2 French after one, two and three years of instruction.

In doing so, we had several goals: presenting a theory (Dynamic usage-Based) that would explain the processes involved in language learning with a high-input implicit method, defining the characteristics of our explicit and implicit methods, and providing answers to the research questions regarding the effectiveness of explicit vs. implicit L2 instruction at the beginning stages of acquisition on general proficiency, complexity, accuracy and fluency for oral and written skills after three years of instruction. Thereby, we suggested that answering those questions in a classroom setting would demand to go beyond the dichotomy between explicit and implicit instruction and to consider type of instruction as being part of a L2 teaching program.

Our main finding is that the implicit program (AIM), despite its lack of traditional grammar explanations and its high focus on oral skills, was more effective on the development of both general oral and written skills after three years of instruction. The longitudinal design of our study showed that the first year of instruction and L2 exposure have been crucial in making the difference between the two groups. The detailed analysis of the oral and written skills of a sub-group of learners with a comparable amount of L2 exposure showed that the implicit program had more effects on complexity and fluency (particularly in L2 use) and on some aspects of accuracy (present tense). On the other aspects of accuracy (gender and negation) and vocabulary, both programs had the same effects. We provided insights from the Dynamic usage-based theory to explain how we think language is processed with the implicit program compared to the explicit program.

Secondly, our investigation revealed that the implicit program provided much more L2 exposure than the explicit program. Teachers using the (implicit) AIM method were all able to maintain a high degree of L2 exposure for reasons that we discussed in the previous section. Teachers using *Grandes Lignes* or *D'accord* differed greatly in the amount of L2 exposure they provided in the classroom, varying from 40 to 60 %, suggesting that it is more difficult to maintain a high level of L2 exposure with an explicit program in the Netherlands. In this dissertation, though, we have not discussed the difficulties that teachers and students experience with the implementation of an implicit program in a regular high school. After the end of our data collection, we witnessed some failures in the implementation of the program because of disagreements within the teaching teams, practical issues at the administrative level, or a hybrid implementation (some teachers still explained grammar explicitly but kept using the gestures and the stories). We certainly hope for more research and support for teachers in this area.

Thirdly, we discussed the limitations and the complexity of an ecologically valid research on the effects of L2 instruction. This classroom-based study involved five schools, 14 teachers and 229 pupils whom we followed during three years. It was impossible to control all the variables involved in the learning process of and despite our endeavours of including and controlling as many variables as possible (such as teacher, school, class, starting level), we are aware of the fact that information on individual differences are missing. The context of the Dutch high-school system did provide us with very homogenous groups in terms of scholastic levels, but the possible additional effects of aptitude, motivation, learning strategies and anxiety were beyond the scope of this dissertation. Throughout this investigation, we realized that there was a fine line between information needed for this study and the efforts asked from teachers who were volunteers. Therefore, we concentrated on a number of variables that were manageable for both teachers and researchers.

The general conclusion of this dissertation must be that if effectiveness is understood as "the extent to which the actual outcomes of instruction match the intended or desired effects (within the practical constraints imposed by the larger instructional context)" (de Graaff and Housen, 2009; p.728), or as we stated in the introduction "to the extent to which L2 instruction achieves better general oral and written proficiency in terms of fluency, grammar and vocabulary as defined in the guidelines of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) or the ACTFL (ACTFL, 1986)" after three years of instruction, a teaching program such as AIM, which provides enough L2 exposure, routines and opportunities for L2 use from the

beginning of the acquisition process, is more effective. Our suggestion is that the method probably demands a complete approach, in which teachers need to be informed, trained and coached in order to be successful in regular high schools.

Our recommendation for the future is to continue to bridge the gap between research and practice by conducting classroom-based research and by including teachers in the conduction of such experiments. To do so successfully, we encourage the funding offices to allocate more money to compensate the teachers' time and efforts when they participate in such studies. This would improve the quality of classroom studies and would increase the interest of teachers in pedagogical research. For the classroom, we recommend teachers to decide as a team to use only the target language in the classroom, even if this might mean a deep transformation, extra courses or the implementation of an entirely new program that provides enough material and tools to ensure L2 exposure and L2 use from the beginning.