

14th International Language, Literature and Stylistics Symposium

# I Know it, but do I know why?

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## Abstract

Identifying second language learners' explicit and implicit linguistic knowledge is essential for researchers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), since the constructs are in the heart of language acquisition. The difference between the two is generally used to characterize the first and second-language acquisition: where the former involves implicit learning and the latter involves both implicit and explicit learning. Studying explicit and implicit dichotomy can be expanded not only to types of learning but also to types of knowledge and instruction. The aim of this study is to investigate a group of Turkish university students' explicit and implicit linguistic knowledge and if they are capable of expressing them. Results indicate that even though the participants were able to state grammatical correctness, they failed to state the reason for their decision.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Dokuz Eylul University, Faculty of Education.

Key words: Explicit; implicit; linguistic knowledge

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## 1. Introduction

In SLA, in recent years, there has been a renewed interest in implicit and explicit knowledge of the second language (L2). These two constructs have always been two central issues in the field. For a long time, there has been a considerable amount of theoretical debate as to how explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge are related (or unrelated), the latter of which is considered as the ultimate type of knowledge because it requires automatic retrieval from memory when producing the target language—a kind of knowledge that native speakers possess and utilize (Sato, 2011). However, recently, the field of inquiry about these two topics generally has been characterized

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around the testing of the constructs and mainly obtaining valid and reliable measures of L2 learners' "implicit and explicit knowledge" (Bowles, 2011; R. Ellis, 2005).

Hulstijn (2005) claimed that investigation of explicit knowledge and its relation to L2 learning has good theoretical and educational value, since explicit knowledge is one of the keys to a successful learning process. He warned, however, that dealing with the construct is a challenge and an investigation requires careful operationalization as, in addition to inconsistent usage of the term, it entails a theoretical complex.

### *1.1. What is Linguistic Knowledge?*

Ellis (2005) states that there are two positions which describe what linguistic knowledge is. The first position draws on the work of Chomsky and the second one draws on the connectionist theories of language learning. According to the first view, all children are born with an innate capacity, which can be defined as a set of universal innate principles of grammar shared by all languages, and which help children to learn their mother tongue. The Chomskyttes believe that Universal Grammar, an in-built biological software within the brain, is responsible for linguistic competence (Clark, 2010). This view suggests that there are some innate universal principles without which a child cannot master his mother tongue. Input is seen essential in the sense that input triggers the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) and this view is mentalist in orientation.

The second view draws on the connectionist theories of language learning. The connectionists however, assume that linguistic competence is achieved in a step-by-step fashion, which implies that language is learnt in the same way as other activities are learnt (Clark, 2010). For them learning a second language is not different from learning to ride a bike. In this view, input is still important. However, more than being important input is seen as the primary source for learning. Without input, learning cannot happen. Feedback and especially corrective feedback is another sine qua non for learning to happen. Both the innatist and connectionist accounts of L2 learning acknowledge that linguistic competence comprises implicit knowledge.

### *1.2. What is Explicit and Implicit Linguistic Knowledge?*

This is a distinction particularly associated with the work of Bialystok (1982). For Bialystok, when linguistic knowledge is implicit it is unanalyzed, i.e. consists of formulas of single words representing whole utterances. When linguistic knowledge is explicit, it consists of analyzed grammatical and lexical units which can be productively combined to produce novel utterances. Some writers (Ellis, 1994: 355) have equated 'implicit' with 'subconscious' knowledge of language (equivalent to Krashen's notion of 'acquisition') and 'explicit' with 'conscious' knowledge of language (equivalent to Krashen's notion of 'learning'). However, in Bialystok's approach explicit linguistic knowledge need not be conscious knowledge. The defining characteristic of 'explicit' is that language is represented as analyzed components, and these may be stored in areas of the brain not accessible to conscious awareness. Hence, explicit knowledge specifically refers to a type of knowledge entailing a language skill to describe, correct, and explain grammatical errors (Green & Hecht, 1992), which was developed by explicit teaching.

The knowledge that most speakers have of their L1 can be defined as implicit. In this way, an individual uses their "intuition" to deduce the correctness of an utterance. For example, all of us are able to identify if a sentence in our first language is grammatically, syntactically or phonologically correct by the way it sounds, however, only the linguists or language teachers would be able to identify which rules are being broken Clark (2010). According to R. Ellis (1994:702, cited in Clark, 2010), "Explicit L2 knowledge is that knowledge of rules and items that exist in an analyzed form so that learners are able to report what they know." This implies that when a student is able to vocalize what they "know", explicit knowledge is manifest. There are many different labels for explicit knowledge. It has been labeled "knowing how" or a possession of a skill which implies that this type of knowledge or learning comes from an external source, from experience, and from consciously cognizing. Explicit knowledge can also be defined as "declarative knowledge" which can mean knowledge of factual information. This would suggest that explicit and declarative knowledge can also be linked to a student's ability to describe a language in terms of rules which is known as "metalingual knowledge" (R. Ellis 1994).

According to Gutiérrez, X. (2012) implicit and explicit knowledge of the second language (L2) are two central constructs in the field of second language acquisition. Implicit knowledge of the L2 is often defined as the intuitive and procedural knowledge that is normally accessed automatically in fluent performance and that cannot be verbalized. In contrast, explicit knowledge is understood as the conscious and declarative knowledge of the L2 that is accessed during controlled processing and that is potentially verbalizable (Bowles, 2011; R.Ellis, 2005). Research about these two constructs has mainly focused on their role in language learning and language use, as well as the relationship between these two types of representations.

Gutierrez (2012) believes that when the role of explicit and implicit knowledge in L2 learning and use is examined, there seems to be consensus in that implicit knowledge is at the core of automated language processing and that the development of these types of representations is the ultimate goal of L2 acquisition (Doughty, 2003: cited in Gutierrez, 2012). On the other hand, the role of explicit knowledge in L2 is still a debatable issue. Some authors like Krashen attribute a very limited role to these types of representations; namely, that of a monitor or editor for L2 production under very specific circumstances. Others (e.g., Hinkel & Fotos, 2002; Johns, 2003; Mitchell, 2000: cited in Gutierrez, 2012) point out that if L2 learners' written performance is successful then that means they have access to their explicit knowledge. R. Ellis (1994) argues that explicit knowledge may play a facilitative role in L2 acquisition in that it may accelerate the establishment of links between form and meaning. N.C. Ellis (2005) notes that explicit knowledge of the L2 plays an important role in linguistic problem-solving: "when automatic capabilities fail, there follows a call recruiting additional collaborative conscious support" (p. 308: cited in Gutierrez, 2012).

## **2. The Study**

If implicit knowledge is the knowledge of language that a speaker manifests in performance but has no awareness of and if explicit knowledge refers to knowledge about language that speakers are aware of and, if asked, can verbalize then their relationship need to be analyzed. This study is an attempt to examine the relationship between second language learners' implicit and explicit knowledge. Through the study explicit knowledge has been taken as learners' explanation of specific linguistic features whereas implicit knowledge refers to the learners' use of these linguistic forms in productive –written and oral- situations.

In the light of the literature, the study in hand is an attempt to identify to what extend the participants can express the type of the linguistic knowledge they have and their degree of awareness of their implicit and explicit linguistic knowledge.

### *2.1. The Instrument*

The instrument used for the study was taken from Ellis, R. (2005). The instrument was an adaptation of an earlier test of metalanguage devised by Alderson Clapham, and Steel (1997) and revised by Ellis (2005). The reliability Cronbach alpha value was found to be .81 which can be considered as highly reliable. The instrument was an untimed grammaticality judgment test (UGJT). One of the most popular instruments used in SLA to measure linguistic knowledge are grammaticality judgment tests. GJTs typically consist of a number of grammatical and ungrammatical sentences, and learners are asked to indicate which ones are correct and which ones are not. Additionally, learners are sometimes asked to identify the error, correct it, and/or describe the grammatical rule violated in the sentence. In GJTs in which learners are only asked to determine the grammaticality of the sentences, there are still questions as to which type of knowledge the tests actually measure (Gutiérrez, 2013).

The GJT used for the study investigated a larger range of grammatical structures, ranging from regular past tense to ergative verbs. The participants were given 17 ungrammatical sentences and each sentence included a mistake per target structure. Given the list, the participants were asked to first of all identify if the sentence was correct or incorrect. In the next column, they were asked to state the certainty degree of their decision (0-100 %). Then, they were asked to state if their decision was based on feeling or rule knowledge. If they felt that the sentence was incorrect they were to say (F) for feeling and if they believe they knew the rule for the incorrect sentence they write (R) for rule. Finally, in the last column the participants were asked to state the reason of their decision (See Appendix A).

The test contained a variety of structures and the choice of the grammatical content was chosen among target language structures that were known to be universally problematic to learners. The structures were selected to represent a broad range of proficiency levels according to when they were introduced in ESL courses covering beginner, lower intermediate, upper intermediate, and advanced levels and they were chosen to include both morphological and syntactic features. Below is the table which shows the test structures and their properties.

Table 1 Test structures and their properties

Structure	Example of Learner Error	Acquisition	Pedagogic Introduction	Type
Verb Complements	Robin says he wants <i>buying</i> a new car.	Early	Lower Intermediate	S
Regular Past tense	Demir <i>complete</i> his assignment yesterday.	Intermediate	Elementary/Lower Int.	M
Question Tags	We will leave tomorrow, <i>isn't it?</i>	Late	No clear focus at any level	S
Yes/No Questions	Did David <i>completed</i> her homework?	Intermediate	Elementary/Lower Int.	M
Modal Verbs	I must <i>to brush</i> my teeth now.	Early	Various levels	M
Unreal Conditions	If he had been richer, she <i>will</i> marry him.	Late	Lower Intermediate/Int.	S
Since and For	He <i>has been living</i> in Turkey <i>since</i> three years.	Intermediate	Lower Intermediate	S
Indefinite Article	They had <i>the</i> very good time at the party.	Late	Elementary	M
Ergative Verbs	Between 1990 and 2000 the population of İzmir <i>was increased</i> .	Late	Various levels	S
Possessive –s	Simon is still living in his rich <i>uncle</i> house.	Late	Elementary	M
Plural –s	Oliver sold a few old <i>coin</i> to a shop.	Early	No clear focus at any level	M
Third person –s	Bart <i>live</i> with his friend Christopher.	Late	Elementary/Lower Int.	M
Relative Clauses	The boat that my father bought <i>it</i> has sunk.	Late	Intermediate/Advanced	S
Embedded Questions	Robin wanted to know what <i>had I done</i> .	Late	Intermediate	S
Dative Alternation	The teacher explained John the answer.	Late	No clear focus at any level	S
Comparatives	The building is <i>more bigger</i> than your house.	Late	Elementary/Intermediate	S
Adverb Placement	She writes <i>very well</i> English.	Late	Elementary/Lower Int.	S

S=Syntactic; M=Morphological

## 2.2. Participants

The study took place at a private Turkish university and 100 English medium university students were given the questionnaires. Unfortunately, only 67 (58% female-42% male) of the participants returned their tests. All participants were freshman students of their English medium university and all had studied one year intensive English language education in their prep year which we can assume their level of English to be at B2 level

according to Common European Framework. All of them were nonnative speakers of English and they were learning English with a 5 year average.

### **3. Results**

The results show that although the learners were able to identify that the sentences were incorrect with a percentage of almost 90 but they could only state the reason in 46% of the cases. In other words, the learners' ability to correct the errors exceeded their ability to explain the rules. An interpretation of these results is that these learners' explicit rules constituted only a subset of their available implicit knowledge. For this particular study, the participants were not asked to correct the sentences but because they were not able to state the reason for incorrectness, some of the participants asked if they can write the correct form instead. For them stating the reason was not possible but they were able to rewrite the incorrect sentence correctly. This basically shows that the participants' metalanguage has not developed enough to express or verbalize the rules.

Almost 80% of the participants reported that they believed the sentences were incorrect by rule not by feel. They trust their explicit knowledge more than their implicit knowledge. However, when asked to state the reason why the sentences were incorrect (give the rule) they could not. Ellis, R. (2004) suggests to verbalize rules, learners must have at least some productive metalanguage and the ability to provide clear explanations of abstract phenomena. Importantly, learners' explicit knowledge exists independently of both the metalanguage they know and their ability to explain rules.

When their certainty was analyzed it was seen that the participants for most of the sentences on the test were almost 100 % sure that the sentence was incorrect. When the analysis was conducted sentence by sentence, it was easy to see that the students' certainty level increased for items that are presented at the earlier stages of their acquisition process.

### **4. Limitations of the Study**

In the literature some researchers have shared their concerns about the use of grammaticality judgment tests. Green and Hecht (1992) believe that an untimed error correction task seems unlikely to produce a good measure of implicit knowledge, as the very nature of the task invites learners to access their explicit knowledge. Mandell (2011) states grammaticality judgment (GJ) test data in research design are used to make inferences about the syntactic structures and rules that constitute learners' linguistic competence, in the Chomskian sense of the word. One criticism leveled at the use of this type of test, however, is that they are not reliable measures of linguistic competence.

**Appendix A.**

		<b>Correct</b>	<b>Incorrect</b>	<b>Certainty (0-100%)</b>	<b>Self-Report (Rule-Feel)</b>	<b>Reason</b>
1	Robin says he wants buying a new car.					
2	Demir complete his assignment yesterday.					
3	We will leave tomorrow, isn't it?					
4	Did David completed her homework?					
5	I must to brush my teeth now.					
6	If he had been richer, she will marry him.					
7	He has been living in Turkey since three years.					
8	They had the very good time at the party.					
9	Between 1990 and 2000 the population of İzmir was increased.					
10	John is still living in his rich uncle house.					
11	Oliver sold a few old coin to a shop.					
12	Bart live with his friend Christopher.					
13	The boat that my father bought it has sunk.					
14	Robin wanted to know what had I done.					
15	The teacher explained John the answer.					
16	The building is more bigger than your house.					
17	She writes very well English.					

From, Ellis, R. (2005)

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