ETAK 2014 ETAK International Conference

Current Trends and Prospects of Communicative Language Teaching in the EFL Context

- **Date** : June 14 (Saturday), 2014
- **Venue** : Baekje Cultural Education Center (Kongju National University)
- **Hosted by** : English Teachers Association in Korea (ETAK)
  KNU English Teaching Research Institute (ETRI)
  Korea Institute of Curriculum and Evaluation (KICE)
- **Sponsored by** : Kongju National University
  National Research Foundation of Korea
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Learning to Sing to a Different Tune: Identifying Means to Enrich Grammar Curricula through Diversifying Explicit Instruction

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1. Introduction

While there is an impressive corpus of research concerning the use of grammar, the true efficacy of explicit grammar instruction has not yet been fully realized. Educators and curriculum designers continue to utilize intuition when designing curricula rather than a firm knowledge of morphosyntactic development. The failure appears to be caused by inconsistent research results and contentious debates, which prevent development of concrete solutions for the adaptation of theory to practice. This issue may best be exemplified by research of grammar instruction and feedback in writing (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Ferris, 2004; Truscott, 1996, 1999; Van Beuningen, DeJong, & Kuiken, 2012). Results concerning this area of research have been widely inconsistent over the years. A study by Johnson (2011), for example, revealed that explicit grammar feedback and instruction has little or no impact on writing, while another study by Feng & Powers (2005) found that it can have significant short and long-term benefits. Such inconsistencies have prevented consensus and have polarized researchers into camps which either support (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Feng & Powers, 2005; Ferris, 2004) or oppose (Truscott, 1996, 1999) explicit pedagogical practices emphasizing grammar.

Essentially, debates over explicit grammar pedagogy and feedback are fueled by insufficient knowledge of the multiple variables influencing acquisition. In the past, researchers emphasized looking at the results of acquisition, rather than causes. In the 1960's, 70's and 80's, for example, researchers studied how grammar was acquired by examining distinct "universal" patterns of morphosyntactic development in both L1 and L2 learners (Brown, 1973; Dulay & Burt, 1973, 1974; Milon, 1974; Wode, 1981). Such research eventually culminated in the emergence of the Natural Order Hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, progressive, copula, and plural morphemes are acquired in early stages of development, while articles, past tenses, the third person singular, and possessive morphemes are acquired late. Though discovery of this pattern of development was insightful, it provided little information that could be used by educators. Concerning this pattern, Cook (1993) stated that, "the order of acquisition is not the reason behind errors; it is a generalisation about errors which still lacks a reason. To me, such remarks are more like Newton announcing that apples fall to the ground than the discovery of the theory of gravity – describing one limited instance rather than explaining it" (p. 44). Because the order did not explain why it occurred, it was of little use to educators. A desired result could not be engineered without knowing precisely what should be changed.

In an attempt to address shortcomings in utility of acquisition orders, Pienemann (1999, 2005) and Johnston (1985) developed a six-stage process of morphosyntactic development referred to as the Processability Model. Within early stages, learners acquire features related to basic SVO sentence construction and begin to manipulate individual phrases (e.g., by adding a plural morpheme to a noun phrase). At later stages of development, learners begin to manipulate elements of a sentence on an interphrasal level. They, for example, begin to invert auxiliary verbs (e.g., *Can he read the book?*) and utilize the third person singular (e.g., He eat*s* a sandwich), which both require joint consideration of the nominal subject and predicate verb phrase. In the final stage of the model, learners manipulate elements on a sentential level. They use cancel inversion, for instance, to prevent inversion of a subordinate clause in an embedded question (e.g., Could you tell me *where* the bank is?) (Cook, 2008; Pienemann, 2005). Unlike prior research of acquisition, the Processability Theory cognitively explained why learners were able, or unable, to learn a particular grammatical feature. Moreover, it allowed for the development of the "Teachability Hypothesis" which predicted when a particular target feature within the order could be successfully introduced. According to the hypothesis, explicit grammar instruction can only be effective if the chosen target feature is in a stage just above the learner's developmental level (Pienemann, 1989). Although the Processability Model did apply theory to practice, it had only a minor impact. The limited number of grammatical features in the model, coupled with the need to provide individualized instruction to learners of multiple developmental levels, made such curricular reforms impractical. A further shortcoming was that, as with other acquisition orders, it overemphasized the universality of grammatical acquisition over key disparities between grammatical features. Researchers such as Goldschneider and DeKeyser (2005) have now recognized that unique phonological, morphosyntactic, and semantic characteristics of grammatical features are major determinants of acquisition order. Each grammatical feature has disparate attributes that explain how and

when a grammatical feature is acquired. Regular plural nouns, for example, which use regular forms such as *-s*, *-ies*, or *–es* (e.g., *cars*, *libraries*, *grasses*), are relatively simple morphologically as well as semantically (they only contain the meaning "plural"), which explains why this feature emerges early within the Natural Order. As for the article, it has very few morphological variants (*a*, *an*, *the*), but is semantically very complex. It can be used, for instance, to signify concepts such as: unique objects in our world (e.g., *the sun*), groups in society (e.g., *the homeless*), parts of a list (e.g., *the first thing is…*), superlatives (e.g., *the biggest*, *the best*), and things already mentioned in a story (e.g., *A man talked to the woman. The man said, "Hi"*) (Celce-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman, & Williams, 1983). The significant semantic complexity of the article explains why it emerges late in the Natural Order.

While different characteristics of grammatical features can explain how and when they are learned, an overemphasis of universal grammar and the "universality" of acquisition order has precluded extensive research on the subject. Further inquiry is needed to understand how semantic, morphosyntactic, and phonological variables influence the acquisition process, so that educators may differentiate explicit grammar curricula according to the distinct traits of each target feature. In accordance with this need, the following questions were posed:

1. How do various characteristics of grammatical features influence acquisition order?
2. How can these variables be manipulated within explicit grammar curricula to hasten acquisition?

After the first research question was investigated, a curriculum was designed and tested to address the second research question. Results of the studies have been summarized below.

2. Examining the Influences of Grammatical Acquisition

Within a recent study conducted by the author (Schenck & Choi, 2012), values for variables that may influence acquisition (semantic complexity, phonological difficulty, morphosyntactic complexity, number of alternate forms, and the frequency within input) were empirically assigned to features of the Processability Model and the Natural Order. These values were then ranked and compared to acquisition orders using the Spearman rank correlation. The following results were obtained for individual variables and the combination (average) of variable values (Table 1).

Table 1
Correlations to the Processability Model and Natural Order

		Semantic Complexity (Number of Meanings)	Sonority (Ability to Hear)	Morpho-syntactic Complexity	Frequency Within Input	Alternations (Number of Forms)	Estimated Combined Influence of Variables
Processability Model	r^s	-.654	-.612	-.797*	.547	-.673*	.821**
	p	.056	.080	.010	.127	.047	.007
Natural Order	r^s	.107	.456	-.268	.477	-.005	.511
	p	.785	.218	.485	.195	.991	.160

While the number of alternations (r^s = -.673) and morphosyntactic complexity (r^s = -.797) were highly significant, the larger combined correlation (r^s = .821) for the Processability Model suggests that multiple variables simultaneously influence manifestation of acquisition order. Likewise, the larger combined correlation of values for the Natural Order, r^s = .511, albeit insignificant, may suggest that there is a combined influence of multiple variables on the acquisition process. The relatively low correlation of the variable values within the Natural Order appears to be caused by syntactic and lexical grammar types that skew the significance of morphological differences. When these outliers are removed, the correlation to the Natural Order grows considerably (r^s = .694; p = .083).

Empirical evaluation of multiple influences appears to predict acquisition order, suggesting that more systematic reform of explicit grammar curricula may be possible. Instructional tasks for each target feature may soon be "engineered" to bring about a desired result. Although more research concerning the empirical evaluation of grammatical features is needed, results of this study are promising, and provide a foundation for the development of future reforms.

3. Using Acquisition Influences to Enhance Instruction

To examine how influences of acquisition could be changed to enhance instruction, grammar curricula explicitly emphasizing meaning (Group 1; *n* = 15), implicitly emphasizing morphosyntactic form (Group 2; *n* = 15), and explicitly emphasizing morphosyntactic form (Group 3; *n* = 17) were designed and administered to three different Korean university EFL classes (Schenck & Choi, 2014). Mean gains on the posttest for natural writing ability (a timed task) were then separated based upon proficiency level and summarized in Figure 1.
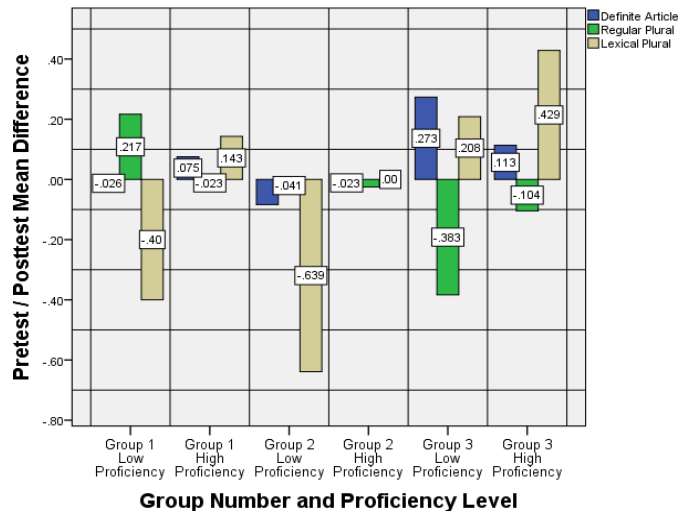
Figure 1 Pretest / posttest mean difference of natural language use based on proficiency level.

Mean gains on the posttest for Group 1 suggest that semantic emphasis of the plural –*s* is useful at low proficiency levels, while semantic emphasis of more complex grammatical features such as the article and lexical plural (which have large numbers of semantic and lexical variants) is beneficial at higher levels of language proficiency. Such a pattern of improvement suggests that images and graphic organizers may be useful with particular grammatical features only at a specific level of proficiency. As for Group 3, which received an explicit emphasis on morphosyntax, learners appeared to outperform their counterparts at both low and high proficiency levels. From qualitative analysis within the study, it appears that these learners utilized a largely bottom-up approach to notice and memorize common usage patterns of grammatical features (e.g., *the homeless*). They were able to utilize memorized collocations, but were unable to make connections to new words not presented in the lesson. In contrast to learners of Group 3, those of Group 1 utilized a largely top- down semantic approach to interpret grammatical features. They made connections to new words or phrases using semantic concepts presented in the treatment (e.g., *the UN*, *the government*). The implicit morphosyntactic emphasis group (Group 2) did not appear to benefit in any way from the treatment.

Overall, the results suggest that characteristics of a grammatical feature, proficiency level, and type of instruction (explicit or implicit) influence the effectiveness of instruction. A firm knowledge of the influence of these factors may help educators design more effective curricular frameworks that enhance the use of grammar. Though useful information was obtained from this research, more research is needed to concretely determine how instruction should be reformed to enhance acquisition.

4. Applying Research to Practice

Results of research concerning acquisition of grammatical features suggests that characteristics of a grammatical feature, type of instruction, and proficiency level of the learner all contribute to the effectiveness of various types of explicit grammar curricula. While more research is needed, the results of this research reveal several means to fuel curricular reform and enhance teacher training. First, explicit grammar curricula should be reformed so that characteristics of each target feature are utilized at a level appropriate for the learner. If the definite article is featured within instruction, for example, a focus on morphosyntactic form may be utilized at lower levels of proficiency to promote acquisition of basic collocations. As learners develop in proficiency, images and graphic organizers which focus on meaning may help expand understanding of contexts and usage.

The introduction of a semantic approach may depend primarily on the complexity of a target feature. With the plural –s, a morphologically and semantically simplistic feature, the approach may be introduced at lower proficiency levels. For the definite article, exploration of complex semantic concepts may be appropriate only at intermediate or high levels of proficiency.

Because disparate attributes of grammatical features influence the efficacy of explicit instruction, it is essential that teachers examine morphosyntactic differences, along with associated means to diversify instruction in response to these differences. Teachers must also understand that prescriptive grammar rules do not control acquisition. Rather, it is a combination of variables concerning sound, meaning, syntax, form, and frequency that drives morphosyntactic development. To faciliate training of such key concepts, inservice teachers may be provided a blank handout such as that in Figure 2 (checks should be removed).

Feature	Easy to Hear	Most Frequent	Many Different Meanings	Many Different Forms	Complex Grammar
Plural -s		✖			
Past Irregular	✖	✖		✖	
Past Regular		✖			
Yes/No Questions	✖		✖	✖	✖
Wh Questions	✖		✖	✖	✖

Figure 2 Sample worksheet for teacher training.

Teachers can be prompted to check two or three boxes in each category (e.g., Easy to Hear, Most Frequent, etc.). They can then give examples to exemplify why they think some features fit into a particular category. An inservice teacher may choose, "Many Different Meanings," to describe yes/no questions, for example, because these questions can convey meanings related to the future, past, an ability, various people, etc. Training in this way can help teachers process the significance of different grammatical characteristics within classroom input. It can also help them to brainstorm better pedagogical techniques that facilitate the learning of each morphosyntactic feature.

In closing, characteristics of a grammatical feature, type of instruction, and proficiency level of the learner all contribute to the effectiveness of various types of explicit grammar curricula. Modern curricular designs and explicit pedagogical techniques must move beyond traditional one-size-fits-all strategies. This can be accomplished in two steps. First, traditional grammar lessons can be systematically transformed by providing activities that target the unique characteristics of each morphosyntactic feature. Secondly, educators can be trained to understand grammatical features, the disparate factors that influence their acquisition, and the appropriate pedagogical techniques to deal with these disparities. Instruction that is differentiated in this way will finally give educators the insight needed to systematically "engineer" a desired result, leading to increased grammatical accuracy and proficiency.

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