

# Intentional versus Incidental Learning

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## **Framing the Issue**

Before comparing incidental acquisition and intentional learning of L2 grammar, it needs to be clarified what is subsumed under “grammar” in this article. Include under the umbrella term grammar here are syntax (e.g., the inversion of subject and verb in English interrogative sentences – e.g., *Do you smoke?*), inflectional morphology (e.g., verb endings – e.g., *played*), the use of “function words” such as articles (e.g., *the*), pronouns (e.g., *their*), auxiliary verbs (e.g., *will* and *should*), and prepositions (e.g., *of* and *by*). We distinguish function words (also called grammatical words) from content words (e.g., *cat*, *swim* and *cute*). The latter belong to the realm of vocabulary and fall outside the scope of this article.

Note, however, that the distinction between function words and content words is not clear-cut. For example, *have* can serve both as a content word denoting possession (e.g., *He has three guitars*) and as an auxiliary (e.g., *I haven't shaved yet*). In fact, it is hard to maintain a clear distinction between grammar and vocabulary more generally. For one thing, not only vocabulary but also grammar expresses meaning. For example, the –s ending in *Will you return your bookss to the library* carries meaning (as it signals you are referring to more than one book), as does the use of *the* in *Would you like the red scarf?* (as it signals there is only one red scarf among the options). It is the meaningfulness of grammar constructions in their own right that enables you to make inferences about the meaning of the following sentence, even though most of its content words have been substituted by nonsense words: *After sprighting her hair bimbulore , she clackoped the trimpol into the bramster.* Another reason why grammar learning cannot be clearly distinguished from vocabulary learning is that words have their own properties which dictate the patterns of usage they occur in. For

example, some verbs require an object (e.g., *He cut his lip*), while others can do without (e.g., *He shaved*). Some verbs can be followed by an infinitive (e.g., *She wanted to go out*), while others prefer an –ing form (or gerund) (e.g., *She suggested going out*). In that way, grammar learning and word learning are two sides of the same coin.

Let's now turn to questions concerning incidental acquisition and intentional learning of L2 grammar. Acquisition is considered to be incidental if it occurs as a by-product of communicative activities, where language learners pick up features of the target language while they are primarily engaged with the content or the message of utterances. Intentional learning, by contrast, occurs as a result of a deliberate focus on the language code. From the vantage point of language teachers, who constantly need to make decisions not only about *how* to teach but also about *what* to teach, it can be of practical interest to estimate the chances that a given grammar feature will be picked up by one's learners *unaided*, i.e., without the need for instructional intervention. Whether a given L2 grammar feature stands a good chance of being acquired unaided by a given learner depends on the interplay of a multitude of factors, however.

One factor is the frequency of occurrence of the feature. The article *an* will be encountered much more often and will therefore feed the learner's intuitions about its use faster than, say, the subject-verb inversion after *Never before* as in *Never before had he felt so embarrassed*. Another feature-related factor is its salience or noticeability. This is relevant because attending to a feature is a first, crucial step on the way to acquiring it. For example, a feature that is perceptually comparatively noticeable (e.g., the –ing verb ending in *She was climbing over the wall*) is likely to have an edge over one that is harder to perceive in the speech stream (e.g., the –ed verb ending in *She climbed the wall*). The degree to which a given feature contributes to the meaning of an utterance (and thus attracts attention because it aids interpretation) is also likely to play a part. For example, one does not need to attend to the –s verb ending in *My daughter plays the piano* to interpret this sentence, and this may help explain why this feature tends to be acquired relatively late (also in L1).

When a given grammar feature *does* attract the learner's attention, additional facets about it are likely to influence the chances that the learner will develop adequate

intuitions about the precise function of that feature and where its use is sanctioned (and where it is not). One of those facets is the degree of consistency of the form-meaning mapping. For example, while the –ing form is often associated with the here and now (e.g., *Can you call back, because we're having dinner*), at other times it is associated with the future (e.g., *We're having dinner at my parents' tomorrow*), and so it may be challenging for a learner to pinpoint the precise function of this feature, added to which the learner will also encounter future time reference being signalled by other means (e.g. *will*). In short, the learner is bound to be confronted with multi-interpretable clues and conflicting evidence as to precisely what a particular form signifies and where its use is sanctioned.

Other factors likely to influence the chances of incidental L2 grammar acquisition relate to the circumstances in which learners are acquiring the language and to characteristics of the learners themselves. If extensive exposure to L2 is a necessary condition for developing adequate intuitions about a grammar feature without explicit instruction, then it follows that learners who are immersed in the L2 community stand a much better chance of accomplishing this than learners whose exposure to the target language is limited to the foreign language classroom. But even with ample exposure and opportunity for engagement with the target language, many L2 learners fail to fully acquire certain of its grammar features. A learner-related factor with direct implications for pedagogical practice is the influence of the learner's mother tongue. Acquiring one's mother tongue entails acquiring certain language processing habits. Those habits may inhibit intake of the kind of features that are relevant in the second or foreign language but have no counterparts in the mother tongue (Ellis & Sagarra, 2010). For example, learners whose mother tongue makes little or no use of inflectional morphology (e.g., Mandarin) tend to pay less attention to inflectional morphology in a target language (e.g., English) than learners whose mother tongue does feature inflectional morphology (e.g., Russian). Instead, they will rely heavily on available lexical cues (because that is what they are used to doing in their mother tongue). For instance, their L1 processing habits will invite them to focus on *Last night* in *He tried to cook dinner last night* to work out that the utterance relates to the past, and this will be at the cost of attending to the grammar feature (e.g. the –ed verb ending). In a similar vein, learners whose L1 does not use inflection to pluralise

nouns (e.g., Japanese) may take a long time to master the use of plural –s in English, despite the very high frequency of occurrence of this grammar feature (Jiang et al., 2011). This does not mean, of course, that learners whose mother tongue is typologically similar to the target language can safely rely on L1 transfer. For example, while English and Dutch share the general grammatical distinction between countable (e.g., *a horse; several horses*) and uncountable nouns (e.g., *\*an information; \*informations*), some nouns that are treated as countable in Dutch are not in English and vice versa. This illustrates again that grammar learning cannot be divorced from word learning.

### 3. Pedagogical Implications

As must be clear from the above discussion, there are many factors – be they feature-related, learner-related or both – that can militate against learners' incidental acquisition of L2 grammar, i.e., acquisition as a by-product of communication and exposure alone. That is why many applied linguists now concur there is a place for interventions which engage learners more directly with the language code. What form these interventions should take is a matter of on-going debate. Due to limits of space we can only review a small number of pedagogical proposals here and do this in broad brush strokes.

Some of the proposals are clearly intended to address the problem that grammar features may go unnoticed. A relatively non-intrusive technique is Input Enhancement, where instances of a selected grammar feature in a text are made salient for the learner, for example through underlining (Sharwood-Smith, 1993). Research on the effectiveness of this technique has yielded rather mixed results, however (Lee & Huang, 2008). In the case of patterns that show a certain amount of variation, it is perhaps unlikely that a set of highlighted instances in a text paints a clear enough picture of the pattern that one hopes the learners will induce. Also, it needs to be borne in mind that highlighted instances of a given feature do not as such inform the learner about when this feature is *not* to be used. For example, highlighted instances of plural –s do not as such tell learners which nouns are *not* compatible with this feature.

A proposal for a pedagogical intervention designed with the express purpose of countering learners' inclination to rely on lexical rather than morphological cues for sentence interpretation is Processing Instruction (VanPatten, 1996). A crucial step in this method is to ask learners to interpret sentences from which lexical cues have been removed, so they experience the need to attend to morphological cues instead. For example, one might present learners with *My daughter plays the piano* and ask them to choose the most likely ending of the sentence: (a) *and she's giving a concert tomorrow* or (b) *but she stopped last year*. Attending to the suffix of *plays* helps to decide that option (b) cannot be right. Similarly, one can present learners with *The boy was given a kiss* and ask them to match this with either a picture of a boy being kissed by a girl or a picture of a boy kissing a girl. To make the right choice, the learners need to attend to the passive voice marker in the sentence, as that is the only available clue. Several studies have found Processing Instruction to be effective, but, again, it is not clear how many grammar features lend themselves to the design of this kind of interpretation activity. Controversy also remains over the question whether the benefits of this method extend beyond receptive (i.e., comprehension) skills into the realm of language production. It stands to reason that productive skills development benefits more directly from output activities (DeKeyser & Sokalski, 2001).

A well-known method which includes a productive component is Present – Practice – Produce (PPP), where learners are first presented with a selected grammar pattern (or rule) which they then practise in decontextualised, discrete-point exercises before they are expected to use the pattern in a more genuine communicative activity. Doing discrete-point exercises and engaging in meaningful communication require rather distinct skills, however, and PPP has been criticized for failing to help learners transfer knowledge from the practice phase – where they can focus exclusively on the grammar pattern at hand – to the free production phase – where they need to divide their attention between meaning-making and linguistic form. PPP is now sometimes characterized as oldfashioned, but it needs to be emphasized that little empirical evidence is actually available to justify an off-hand dismissal of this method.

Still, it is the scepticism about the usefulness of decontextualized, discrete-point grammar exercises which has fuelled the development of Task-Based approaches to

grammar. Unlike language-focused exercises, tasks require the use of language as a vehicle for communication, i.e., as a means to an end rather than an end itself (e.g., learners need to reach a consensus about an issue; they need to exchange information in order to solve a problem). There are several strands and applications of Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT), but due to lack of space we can describe only one application here – using tasks with a planned focus on form. This is the use of communicative activities that ‘naturally’ elicit (learners’ attempts at using) a particular grammar feature, because the feature aids task fulfilment (or may even be indispensable for carrying out the task). If the learner experiences the relevance of the grammar feature in the course of genuine communication, and realises she has not mastered it yet, then learning of the grammar feature is more likely. For example, a teacher or course designer might plan two communicative tasks that require learners to make comparisons (e.g., a ranking task). When learners try the first of these tasks, they may experience a gap in their linguistic resources, if they have not yet mastered certain comparative patterns (e.g., *more... than ...* and *not as ... as...*). This gap can then be filled, possibly through explicit instruction by the teacher. The next task then provides an opportunity for applying the newly acquired knowledge or for fine-tuning and consolidating that knowledge. Designing a task that elicits a chosen grammar feature is not always straightforward, however, because the desired feature may merely be helpful rather than indispensable to perform a task. For instance, one may try giving learners a task where they need to express hypotheses, with a view to eliciting the modal verbs *may*, *might* and *cannot*, but find that the learners manage to complete the task without recourse to these verbs because they can resort to *perhaps*, *maybe* and *not possible* to express the same notions.

In a recent development some applied linguists have started proposing to turn language itself into the subject of learner talk. One possibility in this regard is to present learners with a collection of examples taken from a corpus of native-speaker discourse and to give them the task to work out the pattern that is exemplified. The assumption behind this Discovery Learning is that it fosters deep learning. On the downside, these may be time-consuming activities, and teacher guidance may yet be required to ensure the learners arrive at the appropriate conclusions.

From this brief review of proposals for pedagogical interventions which stimulate a focus on grammar, it appears that all of them have certain limitations in terms of scope. What might work as an intervention for the acquisition of one grammar feature might not work so well for another. Some interventions seem more likely to foster receptive than productive skills. Some interventions are more time consuming than others. A fair degree of eclecticism in one's approach to L2 grammar therefore looks justified.

#### **SEE ALSO:**

Declarative Versus Procedural Knowledge; Explicit Versus Implicit Grammar Instruction; Input Enhancement; Noticing Hypothesis; Planned Versus Incidental Focus on Form; Presentation, Practice, Production Approach; Processing Instruction; Productive Versus Receptive Grammar Knowledge; Pushed Output; Tasks Versus Exercise.

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