

The Role of Explicit Metalinguistic Knowledge in Learning Difficult L2 Grammar

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Explicit instruction and explicit knowledge have long been central to debates about the role of form-focused instruction in instructed second-language acquisition (SLA). Meta-analyses have generally shown advantages for explicit over implicit instruction (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Spada & Tomita, 2010), but the mechanisms underlying these benefits remain debated. One possibility is that explicit instruction provides learners with declarative, metalinguistic knowledge that can be consciously accessed to analyse and monitor L2 forms, particularly when target structures are complex or do not map straightforwardly onto the L1. This may be especially relevant for adult learners. Within the Declarative/Procedural Model, Ullman (2001, 2004) proposes that L2 grammatical knowledge may rely more heavily on declarative memory than native-language grammar, particularly at lower proficiency levels, when proceduralised representations are less established. Explicit knowledge may thus provide learners with a resource for processing difficult L2 structures, potentially supporting the development of more proceduralised knowledge through practice (DeKeyser, 2015; Suzuki & DeKeyser, 2017).

The present study investigates the role of explicit metalinguistic knowledge in the acquisition of difficult L2 morphosyntactic structures by French learners of English. Specifically, we ask: (1) Does explicit metalinguistic training support learners' ability to detect grammatical violations? and (2) Does such training affect not only grammatical performance, but also learners' metacognitive awareness of their grammatical knowledge?

We focus on English tense-aspect morphology, a domain in which French learners must acquire form–function mappings that differ from those of their L1. In particular, English HAVE is followed by a past participle, a morphosyntactic pattern that partially resembles the French compound tense formed with *AVOIR* or *ÊTRE* and a past participle. By contrast, DO in English is followed by the base form of the verb and functions as a supporting auxiliary carrying tense marking, a structure with no direct equivalent in French. We therefore compared the processing of HAVE and DO auxiliaries in past-tense and past-perfect polar questions.

Thirty-two B1-B2 French learners of English completed a timed written grammaticality judgment task (GJT) at pre-and post-test. Half of the sentences were ungrammatical because the main verb form was incorrect (e.g., **Did Mary finished her dinner?*). Between tests, participants completed three training sessions. The explicit group received metalinguistic explanations of the grammatical rules governing the target forms, whereas the implicit group was exposed to grammatical examples. Both groups then completed targeted practice. At post-test, participants additionally provided confidence ratings and attributed their responses to guessing, intuition, or knowledge of a rule.

Participants showed an asymmetry in their sensitivity to grammatical violations: ungrammatical sentences involving the L2-specific DO structure were more difficult to detect than those involving HAVE (Auxiliary $\times$ Grammaticality interaction, $p = .033$). Crucially, a Session $\times$ Training Group $\times$ Grammaticality interaction ($p = .009$) indicated that only participants who received explicit metalinguistic training improved in their detection of grammatical violations. Explicit training also affected learners' metacognitive access to their grammatical knowledge. Confidence was more closely related to performance in the explicit group, suggesting greater metacognitive calibration. Moreover, the explicitly trained group performed above chance whenever they reported that they

were not guessing, including when they attributed their responses to intuition, whereas the implicitly trained group performed above chance only when they reported relying on knowledge of a rule. This shows that the explicitly trained group achieved better metacognition, but also more “intuition-based” (i.e., more implicit) knowledge than the implicitly trained group.

Taken together, the findings suggest that explicit metalinguistic instruction can contribute not only to the development of declarative grammatical knowledge, but also to learners' awareness of when and how that knowledge can be used. Explicit training supported the detection of violations involving an L2-specific structure that was initially particularly difficult, whereas exposure to grammatical examples alone did not produce comparable gains. Explicit metalinguistic knowledge may therefore serve as a valuable resource for adult L2 learners when acquiring difficult grammatical structures, providing a declarative representation that can support performance before, or alongside, the development of more proceduralised knowledge. These findings suggest that metalinguistic explanations may be particularly useful in the classroom when target structures involve complex form–function mappings that are difficult to infer from exposure or transfer from the L1.

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