The Problem of Rule Complexity in Implicit/Explicit Learning

Zsuzsanna Degi (English Applied Linguistics)

This paper aims to present the findings of the empirical research conducted on the categorization of grammatical rules by means of teacher's judgments.

Although the literature on SLA is characterized by a debate over whether or not second language acquisition should make students attend to form, the vast majority of publications support the idea that some kind of focus on form is useful to some extent, for some forms, for some students, at some point in the learning process. (DeKeyser, 2003) As the problem of implicit/explicit learning is far more complex to be dealt with in a single research study, I wish to explore the following research problem: what forms to be learned explicitly or implicitly.

The question can be approached from two perspectives. Firstly, one can theoretically define and categorize grammatical structures. Many researchers (DeKeyser 2003, Ellis 2006 etc.) agree that the complexity of rules plays an important role in the differential effectiveness of implicit and explicit learning, but complexity itself is hard to define. Secondly, empirical research may be conducted on this question, to categorize rule by means of teacher's judgments.

Approaching rule difficulty from this second perspective, the present study intends to examine teacher's evaluation of ten L2 structures on a five-level scale, ranging from very easy to very difficult. Research methods consisted of questionnaires including tasks of ranking different level grammatical structures and qualitative interviews meant to justify teachers' choices regarding rule difficulty.

Subjects were high school and university teachers from Szeged (Hungary) and Csikszereda (Transylvania). Both more (10 or more years of teaching) and less (1-5 years of teaching) experienced teachers were considered. Finally, a comparative analysis of the findings from the two regions was carried out.

By conducting this research I wish to raise the attention of researchers that in the matter of defining rule complexity linguists should rely more on the judgments of those who are more experienced in this field and to cooperate with them.

References

DeKeyser, Robert. 2003. Implicit and Explicit Learning. In: Daughty, Catherine & Michael H. Long, eds. The Handbook of Second Language Acquisition. Oxford: Blackwell.

Ellis, Rod. 2006. Modelling Learning Difficulty and Second Language Proficiency: The Differential Contributions of Implicit and Explicit Knowledge. *Applied Linguistics*, 27:431-463.