

The influence of explicit instruction and implicit approaches to instruction on older adult and young adult learners

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This article will disclose the influence of explicit instructional approaches on older adult and young adult learners and compare the impact of explicit instruction between chosen groups of learners with regards to their age. Moreover, the article looks at differences between explicit and implicit instructional approaches, aiming to reveal the influence on progress of both types of approaches to different age groups. Thus, the article shows that, in some cases (depending on the type of practiced skill), explicit instruction has more positive effects on more adult learners, whereas young adult learners can also benefit from implicit instruction as well as explicit. Nevertheless, many factors should be taken into account before making any concrete conclusions, as the background and incentives of learners for making progress in their studies should also affect the outcome.

Keywords: adult learners, explicit instructional approach, implicit instructional approach, young adult learners.

Introduction

The discussion of advantages of explicit approaches to instruction is ongoing in the field of language teaching and learning, due to the fact that modern education is shifting towards teachers being facilitators of the process of deriving knowledge rather than the sole source of knowledge. Thus, the effect of implicit instruction on students' learning is currently a prominent topic of discussion among researchers. Moreover, its role in adult education is of great interest in research, as adult education is a sphere that has not been tackled enough. Furthermore, with the current asylum seekers situation, world population migration, and the presented need for immigrants' social assimilation, this sector of education is becoming more relevant as the need for proper qualifications in the job market among new comers arises (Madrigal-Hopes, Villavicencio, Foote, & Green, 2014; Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Moreover, the most pervasive issue that the hosting countries encounter is the language barrier of newly arrived dwellers (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). For this reason, the paper focuses mostly on explicit and implicit approaches predominantly used in language acquisition. As people entering host countries vary in age and, therefore, possibly in their rate of language acquisition, the research also compares two groups of younger and older adult learners and the influence of learning approaches presented to them. Thus, this paper can potentially assist in finding better approaches that would meet the requirements for improved language acquisition among younger and older adult learners. Concomitantly, the findings could intermediately contribute to learners' quicker and more successful social assimilation.

In order to do this, explicit approaches to instruction in reading, vocabulary, writing, and grammar in adult education for older and young adult learners will be covered. Explicit vs. implicit instruction and their influence on adult learners will also be highlighted, as well as explicit instruction vs. practice in terms of processing instruction. To discuss the influence of explicit instruction and its further comparison with implicit instruction and practice, it is important to give definitions to existing terms. Thus, the following research questions arose during the research: What is the best language teaching approach for younger adult learners? What is the best teaching approach for older adult learners?

Explicit instruction definitions, types, and approaches

Explicit instruction informs learners explicitly about the target of instruction, usually with an opportunity to practice the presented targets (Ellis, 2015, p. 241). According to Ellis (2015), explicit instruction does not limit its use to only one type. It can be both deductive and inductive. In the deductive type of instruction, students first obtain the explanation of the rule and then are exposed to corresponding examples; in the inductive type, students elicit the rules themselves from given examples (Andrews, 2007).

In addition, Ellis (2015) reports six instructional approaches. The Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) approach is probably the most frequently used approach in teaching. It comprises explicit instruction, practice through exercises and a production stage where a student can use the acquired skill in his/her writing or speaking.

According to Ellis (2015), next follows the integrated explicit instruction that takes place during communicative activities. The concept-based approach is based on thorough explanation of “scientific concepts”, or features (Ellis, 2015, p. 243). This approach usually takes place when working with complex grammar. The comprehension-based instructional approach develops receptive skills over productive. These four approaches refer to the deductive type of instruction (Ellis, 2015). The following approaches fall into the inductive type of instruction. Pattern practice includes extensive drilling in order to develop the automatized production of grammar patterns in students’ speaking and writing (Ellis, 2015). Finally, Ellis (2015) presents a consciousness-raising approach that provides students with tasks that are aimed at the construction of explicit rules by students themselves.

Processing Instruction

According to Ellis (2015), Processing Instruction assists students in surmounting the difficulty of so-called “default” (p. 254) when learners overlook grammatical or lexical features, due to the presence of features that are easily and immediately identifiable. For this reason, this explicit form of instruction that reduces their default processing of information should take place during lessons.

Implicit instruction

Implicit instruction is mainly concerned with teaching and developing communicative skills (Ellis, 2015). The author distinguishes between two major types of implicit instruction. The first is concentrated on meaning. It is based partly on Krashen’s hypothesis that language can only be acquired. For this reason, no additional explanation of grammar is provided (Ellis, 2015). The second type is “enhanced input” (p. 267), where a teacher can use his/her voice or written texts that may have highlighted portions that are employed to attract students’ attention to acquire new forms (Ellis, 2015).

Adult learners

Now that we are clear with definitions of instructions, we can move onto adult education. To justify the choice of focusing on adult learners, it is important to elaborate on the peculiarities of this type of education. Nielson (2015) states that adult education represents students with various needs. For example, she claims that previous negative experience in education can affect levels of motivation. Moreover, from the perspective of the problem of Dryden-Peterson (2016), who focused his research on asylum seeker learners, adults have to assimilate into the new society where they face difficulties, especially in terms of language acquisition, which can present an obstacle to them due to a lack of basic learning technique if coming from less developed countries. Thus, it is crucial to find better solutions in teaching approaches that would better meet their needs (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

According to Madrigal-Hopes, Villavicencio, Foote, and Green (2014), although significant improvement is taking place in adult education, the use of children books, underdeveloped programs, previous learning backgrounds, and problems with retention of students due to family matters negatively affect this scope. For this reason, a necessity for the proper adoption of teaching approaches currently exists. Adult learners that obtained limited education may be lacking in learning techniques (Huang & Newbern, 2012). For this reason, it is important to assess what kind of instruction corresponds with their needs. According to Cox and Sanz (2015), older adult and young adult learners may differ in terms of what instruction they find most appropriate. Researchers and educators should take into account age differences, cognitive abilities, and the time gap between previous and current study experiences. It makes sense to compare both older and younger adults in order to avoid overgeneralization.

Explicit approaches to instruction and older adult learners

A study conducted by Huang and Newbern (2012) examines the influence of metacognitive explicit reading strategy instruction on adult learners. Although the study does not specify the age of participants, it is clear from the context that they are older adults who desire to strengthen their level of English in order to obtain better jobs and enhance standards of living for their families. The research employed both quantitative and qualitative data for analysis. Quantitative data was obtained through pre- and post-treatment tests. Moreover, an experiment group that did not receive the treatment was also used to assess the effectiveness of the intervention (Huang & Newbern, 2012).

The research took five metacognitive strategies for explicit instruction as a basis. They are: “Highlighting important Information, Previewing Text for Main Ideas, Rereading Selected Content, Guessing Meaning of Unfamiliar Words and Applying Prior Knowledge” (Huang & Newbern, 2012, p. 71). The strategies rely on three metacognitive strategies created by Mokhtari and Sheorey, as cited in Huang and Newbern (2012) in their “Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS)” (p. 68). The authors believe that metacognitive reading strategies should aim to develop “global reading strategies, problem-solving and support strategies” (Huang & Newbern, 2012, p. 68).

Metacognitive strategy raises students’ awareness of employed techniques, such as observing their own progress and choosing strategies by themselves. These strategies often result in better reading skills in students (Alderson, as cited in Huang & Newbern, 2012). Teachers can employ “the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach model,” created by Chamot and O’Malley, in order to teach each strategy. This model appears to be a more expanded version of Ellis’s PPP. PPP in the CALLA model is also followed up with self-evaluation and expansion (Huang & Newbern, 2012). Students are able to share strategies that they find best work for them and evaluate each other. Expansion supposes further usage of the strategy into various readings (Huang & Newbern, 2012).

After gathering the data, it was revealed that the group that obtained the treatment significantly outperformed the one that did not receive it. It is worth noting that the most frequently used strategies were highlighting for information and rereading the text (Huang & Newbern, 2012). Before that, students reported on translating every word; however, during the experiment it was revealed that they were guessing words from the context more (Huang & Newbern, 2012). The given study that was conducted through comparison of two similar groups of students shows that explicit metacognitive reading strategy instruction positively influences older adult learners (Huang & Newbern, 2012).

Another study on older adult learners examines waste collection drivers and their supervisors with limited English proficiency (Madrigal-Hopes, Villavicencio, Foote, & Green, 2014). The specific features of the research are that it focuses on exploring the impact of explicit work-specific vocabulary instruction on workers’ enhancement of the knowledge and ability to apply the acquired material. The study employed a six-step framework. Rosenblat (1994) suggested this framework (Madrigal-Hopes, Villavicencio, Foote, & Green, 2014), which is based on the idea that, while reading, students rely on their personal backgrounds and each of them elicits something different from the given text. This led the authors to the idea that this framework was applicable in terms of teaching older adults where their background could foster better learning. For this reason, the five-week organized course was designed using this framework.

According to Madrigal-Hopes, Villavicencio, Foote, and Green (2014), the six-step process consists of teachers’ provision of the explanation of a new word. Then students are to rephrase it using their own vocabulary; after that, learners must mime or use modes other than words to present the word. Furthermore, learners are frequently given tasks for them to practice. In the fifth step, they need to discuss the term with each other. At stage six, they may play games with the learnt words. This framework does not correlate with the one given by Ellis (2015). However, the findings after post-test, observation, and interviewing revealed that, after several weeks of being enrolled in the program, an interviewed worker noticed that during the revision activity he recognized all the words that he had encountered frequently during his practice with cars at work (Madrigal-Hopes, Villavicencio, Foote, & Green, 2014). Unlike the study above, this research did not employ two experimental groups. However, it is worth noting that the observation of workers in the workplace was used to assess the progress.

Moreover, researchers reported on the expanded vocabulary used in writing assignments. Most importantly, workers managed to understand their colleagues and enhance satisfaction with their work (Madrigal-Hopes, Villavicencio, Foote, & Green, 2014). For this reason, we can conclude that, at least with beginner students that need job-targeted vocabulary, the six-step framework appears to be effective. Compared to previously discussed research, we can observe that the ability to monitor and employ acquired skills is crucial for adult learners. In both cases, students did not stop at mere practice tasks. Both metacognitive strategy and the six-step framework require the expansion of the use of acquired skills.

Explicit approaches to instruction and young adult learners

In this section, I would like to start from the research on teaching writing skills through explicit instruction. Although the research focuses on adult learners, it does not give any specific reference to age. The reason that I decided to place it in this part of the paper is personal. As a non-native English speaker, and concomitantly a young adult learner, I struggle with writing in English. Nevertheless, according to Nielsen (2015), there is little emphasis given to writing instruction.

This particular study examines the number of findings from studies in the scope of adult education on explicit instruction in teaching writing. As was previously stated, motivation and persistence could be at a lower level among adults. For this reason, explicit instruction sets clear goals that motivate students to achieve a certain level (Nielsen, 2015).

Feedback is also important in raising learners' motivation because it provides students with a feeling of progress. Moreover, Nielsen (2015) claims that for learners who have low levels of literacy it is crucial to obtain explicit instruction on how to construct their papers. This happens for several reasons. First, most of their knowledge on writing is based on school programs that do not provide enough exposure for writing development (Nielsen, 2015). Second, drafting, revisiting, and other strategies improve metacognitive abilities. This is directly correlated with the first study on reading. In these ways, adult learners get an opportunity to be in charge of their success in both skills.

A study by Andrews (2007), which explores the influence of implicit and explicit instruction in grammar teaching among young adults aged 13-19, revealed the following: the groups involved in explicit instruction outperformed learners from the implicit group in tests on complex grammatical structures; however, it is worth noting that young adult learners showed less significant results than the implicit group's participants in a delayed test (Andrews, 2007). Despite the fact that the research does not focus on approaches to instruction, I find it valuable as it presents an accurate sample of the population that is considered as young adult learners. This is not enough to draw conclusions; however, the results may suggest that young adult learners do not depend on explicit instruction to such a great extent as adults. It also may mean that, in this study, learners might not have achieved as much expansion of knowledge as in previous studies, as the approaches to instruction were not discussed there. Moreover, previous studies explored reading and writing skills, while this research focuses on grammatical patterns. For all the given reasons, it is clear that more research should be performed and analyzed before suggesting which kind of instruction is most suitable for one type of learner or another.

The influence of kinds of instruction on young adult and older adult learners

Although the focus of this paper is on explicit instruction, some research focuses on a comparison of two kinds of instruction. I also find it important to look at what kind of instruction brings more benefits to learners. Otherwise, without presenting both sides of the issue, there is a greater chance of deriving false conclusions. As stated above, the research conducted by Andrews (2007) illustrates that implicit instruction positively influences knowledge in the long-term memory, even in complex grammatical structures, among young learners. In terms of simple rules of grammar, students scored similar results despite the kind of instruction.

Another important point raised by the author is the opportunity to practice knowledge outside the classroom. For example, in studies conducted by Huang and Newbern (2012) on reading and Madrigal-Hopes, Villavicencio, Foote, and Green (2014) on reading and vocabulary learning, the participants studied English and were residents of the USA by that time. None of those authors pointed out such important facts. However, this may have occurred due to their focus on employed strategy rather than comparison. For this reason, it is strongly suggested that it is crucial for this paper to examine both kinds of instruction, even though explicit instruction is the main focus.

Nazari (2013) is another author that doubts the superiority of an explicit approach to teaching grammar. In his research on Iranian younger adult elementary English learners, he reveals that, although explicit instruction students scored better in grammar tests compared to implicit instruction students, the fact that Iranian education is essentially based on explicit instruction gave some learners privilege due to a familiar learning background (Nazari,

2013). This brings us back to Madrigal-Hopes, Villavicencio, Foote, and Green (2014), and their idea of the importance of the acknowledgment of students' learning backgrounds. In this particular situation, the background had a positive influence on students' performance. As we can see, both Andrews (2007) and Nazari (2013) do not assert that explicit instruction is a priority, or that it ensures the best results in language acquisition.

Although the last article by Cox and Sanz (2015) does not directly discuss explicit and implicit instruction, it is the one that actually compares younger and older adult learners and the influence of explicit instruction and practice on their outcomes in learning Latin grammar. The age difference between participants is significant. It varies between "age 60+" and "age 19-27" (Cox & Sanz, 2015, p. 225). The explicit instruction is juxtaposed with processing instruction. The explicit instruction that is presented in this study appears to be a mere lecture on Latin grammar with no opportunity for students to take notes. Meanwhile, processing instruction allows some practice and feedback during computer tests (Cox & Sanz, 2015). In Ellis (2015), explicit instruction does not restrict itself to lecturing of the material. Learners are welcome to practice the given information and receive meaningful feedback. For this reason, it is not clear why those two kinds of explicit instruction would be presented as two different ones.

The findings revealed that, even though young adult learners scored significantly more in post-testing after exposure to only explicit instruction compared to another group, in terms of delayed testing, older adults showed better results. It allows the claim that, despite the initial difference due to memory demands and the absence of practice, age does not become a weakening factor towards learning grammar (Cox & Sanz, 2015). Considering the situation when both groups were given processing instruction, older adults outperformed younger peers in the first and subsequent tests (Cox & Sanz, 2015).

Conclusion

The findings from the studies of Cox and Sanz (2015), Huang and Newbern (2012), and Madrigal-Hopes, Villavicencio, Foote, and Green (2014) allow us to conclude that the opportunity for older adult learners to practice and expand acquired skills as well as to monitor their own enhancement in explicit instruction are essential for progression. Meanwhile, Andrews (2007) and Nazari (2013) are rather skeptical about the influence of explicit instruction on young adults' performance in grammar.

However, the results may vary depending on the focus of the instruction. For example, although the research on writing does not specify how the age and findings can be suitable for both groups, from my own experience, I can state that explicit instruction in writing is crucial for students' progress, although the situation with grammar may be different. For this reason, in order to decide on the kind of instruction that suits the particular age group, we should also take into account the focus of the instruction.

Despite the given conclusions, further research on the comparison of younger and older adult learners is needed due to the lack of the literature on this matter. Moreover, more research on the influence of kinds of instruction on adult vs. young learners (children) will add to the understanding of the kinds of instruction suitable for different age groups.

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