

Benefits of Guided Discovery Grammar Instruction in the EFL classroom

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Abstract

The literature on the teaching of grammar in the FL classroom is very broad, covering a wide spectrum of theories ranging from explicit-deductive instruction to implicit-inductive instruction. However, the effectiveness of these extreme methods has not been accepted unanimously. The aim of this study is to analyse the adequacy of an intermediate position; i.e., an explicit-inductive approach known as Guided Discovery Approach and its positive effects in EFL grammar learning. The results of this study will show how the Guided Discovery Approach obtains better results than explicit-deductive instruction in the EFL classroom.

Keywords: explicit, implicit, deductive, inductive, guided discovery approach, affective variables, EFL classroom

Título: Beneficios de la enseñanza de la gramática a través del descubrimiento guiado en la clase de inglés como lengua extranjera.

Resumen

La bibliografía sobre la enseñanza de la gramática en el aula de lenguas extranjeras es muy extensa y cubre un amplio espectro que va desde la enseñanza explícita-deductiva hasta la implícita-inductiva. Sin embargo, la efectividad de estos extremos no es aceptada unánimemente. En este artículo analizaremos la idoneidad de una posición intermedia, es decir, un enfoque explícito-inductivo conocido como el enfoque del descubrimiento guiado y sus efectos positivos en el aula. Los resultados de este artículo demostrarán cómo el enfoque del descubrimiento guiado obtiene mejores resultados que el método explícito-deductivo en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: explícito, implícito, deductivo, inductivo, enfoque del descubrimiento guiado, variables afectivas, aula de inglés como lengua extranjera.

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THE GUIDED DISCOVERY APPROACH

The Guided Discovery Approach (GDA, henceforth) is a learner-centred inductive approach in which learners, by themselves, can develop explicit grammar knowledge with the teacher's help. Although there is a great repertoire of approaches in which we can present explicit grammar knowledge to students, according to the abundant literature available on grammar teaching, many authors support this approach as the best way of presenting explicit grammar to learners.

The GDA emerges because of the dissatisfaction with either an implicit or explicit presentation of grammar in the classroom. This dissatisfaction has led to a combination of meaning-focused and forms-focused instruction. This approach which combines both implicit and explicit instruction is a modified inductive approach in which exposure to the language has to occur first, before explicit focus on grammar and practice.

This innovative method was promoted by Jerome Bruner in the 1960s on the basis that learners are more likely to remember those things that they have discovered by themselves. His aim was to generate interest and motivate learners about classroom resources, catch their attention and build a common knowledge among them. For this reason, in guided discovery instruction, quoting Pawlak's (2004: 278) words, "learners are provided with data which illustrate the use of a particular grammatical structure which they analyse in order to arrive at some generalisation that accounts for regularities in the data".

Added to this, GDA is mainly characterised by the importance of the learner and the role of the teacher, who becomes a facilitator and guides learners in the right direction in order to avoid misunderstandings of the rules. This approach manages that learners are more actively involved in the learning process and makes them responsible for their own learning.

In what concerns the effectiveness of GDA, Caprario (2013) and other authors (Alfieri, Brooks and Aldrich, 2011) have provided important concluding evidence. Specifically, Alfieri et al.'s (2011:11) empirical studies compare GD instruction with unassisted discovery and traditional explicit instruction. The authors conclude that “the construction of explanations or participation in GD is better for learners than being provided with an explanation”. Thus, perceiving a pattern and being able to hypothesise about a rule is more satisfying and gratifying for learners than being taught about that rule.

And in contrast to these positive factors, the main disadvantage of the GDA is that, as a type of implicit-inductive instruction, getting students to discover a rule takes up a lot of valuable in-class lesson time. Something that would not be a problem if it would guarantee that the right rule is hypothesised, but sometimes learners misunderstood the rule. Another disadvantage is the fact that the GDA approach demands more careful selection and organisation of the materials than in other approaches in order that they guide learners to discover the rule at the same time it ensures intelligibility. However, we must state that learners' personal variables will positively affect the success of the implementation of this method.

KEY VARIABLES INFLUENCING GDA: LEARNERS' REQUIREMENTS AND CONTEXTS

In order to apply different types of instruction, we have to bear in mind a diverse set of factors affecting students' learning process. These internal characteristics affect the way in which language is acquired and make some learners be more successful than others in this process. The degree of success in FL proficiency is determined by the learners' individual differences such as motivation, attitude or anxiety, among others.

Level of proficiency

Concerning the level of proficiency and its positive correlation with students' successful FL acquisition, we must highlight two important studies related to this specific topic, whose results seem to show conclusive evidence. To be more specific, we will refer to Rodríguez's (2009) and Ellis' (2006) revisions. Rodríguez (2009) explains some of the differences between students depending on their level of proficiency in grammar instruction. He addresses directly to instructors since it is their duty to choose the best approach for their students. He posits that learners' developmental readiness should be considered before deciding whether a focus on form approach is appropriate in a specific context.

Rodríguez (2009) differentiates between learners with low literacy (children and beginners) and advanced students. In this line, the findings of this study prove that beginning learners often struggle to comprehend form in their L1 and it would be not recommendable to teach them L2 grammar until they have achieved a higher stage of literacy. This conclusion is also shared by Ellis (2006) who agrees that beginners should not start learning a foreign language with a focus on form approach. Instead, they (the learners) should acquire basic structures, vocabulary and basic ability to communicate before.

Contrarily, advanced learners may benefit from a more explicit approach but always within a communicative context. In this respect, the degree of explicitness involved in focus on form instruction is questioned since it varies depending on the students' level of proficiency; i.e. from a more implicit way in the case of beginning learners to a more explicit way which benefits advanced learners.

After reviewing these studies, we can come to the conclusion that, although beginners and advanced learners need different types of instruction, the GDA can be successfully implemented in both groups since the teacher can adapt the degree of explicitness performed. In this sense, beginners would benefit from GDA by discovering how the target language is structured and how it functions; and advanced learners would do so by discovering the rules underlying the FL.

Age

Age is another personal variable to take into account given that the mechanisms for EFL used by children and adults are very different; they use different strategies. Dekeyser (2003: 334) posits that while children use “domain-specific learning procedures, adults draw on native language knowledge and problem-solving systems”. In this way, children's use of language-specific learning mechanisms is unconscious; their learning does not involve awareness whereas adults use their analytical abilities to work out L2 structures and they also compare L2 and L1 structures to figure out the differences.

Andrews' (2007) findings, based on Ellis's (1996) study, show that adult learners do benefit from formal (and explicit) instruction, that teacher talk is helpful for them and that adults relate new information to their L1. In accordance with Andrews' (2007) contribution, Nazari (2013) and Rodriguez (2009) also support the outperformance of adult learners when they are taught explicitly because they have always been taught according to traditional methods of education which are explicit.

With respect to young learners, Ellis (2005) states that the teaching of grammar early in the curriculum is valuable (but not a requirement) because it provides a basis for the real learning that follows. Besides, Caprario (2013) states that, either in one age group or another (children and adults), grammar implemented within a GDA is more effective over other types of instruction. So, it could be concluded that GDA can succeed in contexts with both children and adult learners over explicit-deductive or implicit-inductive instruction because this approach can be adapted to the learners' necessities depending on whether they are adults or children.

AFFECTIVE VARIABLES IN THEIR CORRELATIONS WITH GDA

Within some possible influential variables, we find three of the most studied ones which are motivation, attitude and anxiety. We have included these three variables in the same section given that they are closely related among themselves as they are crucial factors in achieving successful FL proficiency. Much has been said about these scholarly constructs; probably as a result of their easy observable features. For that reason, there is a large amount of studies that show how these variables are highly correlated with the GDA. To illustrate this, Tahaine and Daana (2013), among others, investigated the phenomenon of L2 motivation in relation to attitude.

Motivation

According to Tahaine and Daana (2013), motivation involves expending effort, persisting in the activities, attending to the tasks and showing desire to achieve the goal. In this sense, GDA is a methodological attempt to increase learners' motivation in a variety of ways, for instance, by varying the activities typology or by implementing a cooperative environment in the classroom rather than a competitive one which would raise learners' self-confidence. Therefore, developing these GDA techniques is crucial since motivation is the first reason for learners' failure or success in FLL.

Tahaine and Daana (2013) distinguish between two types of motivation: integrative and instrumental, both of them closely related to attitude. Integrative motivation consists of "learning a language because the learner wishes to identify himself with or become integrated into the society of the target language" (Gardner, 1983, cited in Tahaine and Daana, 2013: 162). In contrast to this, instrumental motivation consists of "learning a language because of the utility it might have for the learner" (Gardner, 1983, cited in Tahaine and Daana, 2013: 162). Thus, integrative motivated learners are more likely to succeed than instrumentally motivated learners because the learner owns personal interest and wishes to learn that language.

In Henter's (2013) study, the findings reveal that 35% of performance in FLL can be predicted by motivation. She compared two groups of learners: students from the faculty of Psychology-pedagogy and students from the faculty of Arts. Affective factors showed the difference between students who major in English and those who do not (psychology-pedagogy) in the results for the performance of English. The t-test performed showed that students majoring English (those from the faculty of Arts) were more motivated and had a more positive attitude towards FLL than students in Psychology-pedagogy who were more anxious during the FL class. Hence, Henter's (2013) research demonstrates that instrumental motivation (Faculty of Arts' learners who major in English) leads to success, and therefore, the prediction is confirmed.

In addition, it is crucial to stress the fact that a learner can own both kinds of motivation; that is, a learner may be learning a foreign language because he or she needs it for personal purposes, while, at the same time the learner may be integratively motivated. It is also important the fact that motivation and attitude are closely related: a negative attitude can be reflected in low motivation whereas a positive attitude can be reflected in high motivation, and therefore, the learner can be more successful in the FLL.

Motivation is directly influenced by the GDA. This approach, which promotes cooperative and dynamic work, may help integrative motivation arise. In this sense, the GDA allows the teacher to use different resources and materials so that the learners can get involved in the learning process and develop a positive attitude towards the target culture which will

mean increasing their integrative motivation. Therefore, by implementing GD instruction, learners can be both integratively and instrumentally motivated.

Attitude

Attitude can be defined as the learner's personal positive or negative reaction towards something, in this case, towards the target language. Attitudes are situational, i.e. they can change with experience. And in this sense, in FLL, attitude can be towards the community and people who speak the FL; and, towards learning the target language itself. These attitudes are influenced by the learner's personality and experiences. At the same time, if attitudes are favourable, they can motivate the learner and vice versa. Attitude is directly related to motivation since those learners who like the people who speak the target language and their culture are more successful. Thus, positive attitudes result in high integrative motivation and the learner might be more likely to succeed.

And with reference to the positive influence of this variable on students' proficiency level, we must state that the GDA, apart from motivating students with its different activities typology and its communicative and cooperative environment, also helps attitude to become more favourable and positive. In a context where the learner is instrumentally motivated and his or her attitudes towards the target language and the foreign language class are negative, the GDA can turn these negative attitudes into more positive ones. This positive attitude can be achieved by working with different activities in which learners can participate and get involved, or by working cooperatively. In addition, the GDA allows the teacher to use different resources and materials so that the learners can get involved in the learning process and be both integratively and instrumentally motivated.

Anxiety

Another variable that may interfere in FLL is anxiety, which is also related to attitude. Studies demonstrate that high levels of anxiety may lead to negative attitudes towards FLL. Then, lowered anxiety may lead to positive attitudes towards FLL increasing integrative motivation and helping the process of FLL. That is the reason why we could say that anxiety and attitude indirectly influence motivation.

In Henter's (2013) study, language anxiety is defined as a feeling that provokes difficult concentration, sweating, worry and fear in the FL class. Anxious learners feel less competent and they are afraid of making mistakes when they speak in front of the class and this fear can lead them to build negative attitudes towards FLL. However, the solution for anxiety is experience and the GDA can help, in this sense, to overcome this problem. According to the above-mentioned author (2013), in GDA, learners are encouraged and have more opportunities to speak and communicate than in other approaches. And, thus, giving them more opportunities to communicate can make learners feel more comfortable within the classroom environment reducing their anxiety.

Equally relevant to mention here is the role of the teacher that is a key factor to reduce learners' anxiety. As Henter (2013) mentions, the teacher should encourage and support learners by using positive language and avoid negative feedback in front of the class. Instead, collective feedback can be provided to the learners. Another clue to reduce anxiety is the creation of a relaxed environment with cooperative activities rather than competitive, where learners do not need to feel stressed in order to win. In addition, the teacher should provide learners enough opportunities for them to speak in front of the class showing their ideas and opinions and challenging them to contribute when grammar rules are being hypothesised.

Levels of processing and autonomy

Learning autonomy is another variable that affects FLL. Autonomy is defined as the work that the learner does by himself, being the learner responsible for his own learning. In the case of GDA, autonomy is a paramount factor since this approach intends learners to take part in the process of learning so that they work individually to discover rules. Therefore, GDA involves, to a great extent, autonomous work, individualised at the beginning and cooperatively then. Consequently, the aim is to help learners enhance and develop autonomy so that learning can be more profitable not only in FLL, but also in other areas.

According to the literature collected, it can be stated that when learners are responsible for their own learning, they are more motivated and learning effectiveness increases. In this sense, these learners understand that their success is the

result of their effort. For this reason, it can be highlighted that autonomy might be another factor that influences motivation.

Nassaji and Fotos (2011, cited in Caprario, 2013) pose that exposure to the target language and participation in communicative activities help processing and retention as well as increases learners' awareness of the target language form. It is obvious that learners cannot achieve to completely master a new form in few lessons, given that attaining high levels of proficiency requires a time-consuming learning process. During the first exposure sessions, the learner becomes aware of the new structure, and after practicing and mastering it, the learner internalises it and the target structure becomes part of his or her interlanguage. In addition, autonomous work helps the process of internalisation to occur since those rules discovered by the learner and his subsequent practice are better acquired when the learner works them out by himself instead of being told.

CONCLUSION

This study has presented evidence about how an explicit-inductive approach is more successful in the EFL context than a completely explicit-deductive or an implicit-inductive approach. GDA meets learners' grammar needs and, even taking into account personal and affective variables, GDA still remains the most successful approach and the one which best achieves EFL grammar learners' proficiency.

We can finally conclude that GD instruction meets EFL grammar learners' needs. This approach takes into account personal and affective variables which are one of the main factors for learners' failure or success. Krashen (2002, cited in Tahaineh and Daana, 2013) states that learners with high motivation, positive attitudes, self-confidence and a low level of anxiety are more likely to succeed in FLL. GDA motivates learners, increases positive attitudes towards the target language and reduce learners' anxiety by creating a collaborative and cooperative classroom environment. In addition, learners participate in the process of learning, they produce autonomous work, and it helps them acquire and become more proficient in the FL. These are the reasons why the implementation of GDA in the foreign language classroom would achieve better results in the field of EFL.

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