Izaskun Elorza, Ovidi Carbonell i Cortés, Reyes Albarrán,
Blanca García Riaza and Miriam Pérez-Veneros (Eds.)

# EMPIRICISM AND ANALYTICAL TOOLS FOR 21 CENTURY APPLIED LINGUISTICS

## SELECTED PAPERS FROM THE XXIX INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE SPANISH ASSOCIATION OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS (AESLA)

AQUILAFUENTE

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REYES ALBARRÁN, BLANCA GARCÍA RIAZA
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# THE 'INTERFACE ISSUE' IN SLA: IS THERE A REFLECTION IN ELT MATERIALS? RATIONALE FOR A PROPOSAL

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RESUMEN

*Desde que Krashen (1981, 1982) suscitó el problema de 'aprendizaje' frente a 'adquisición', se ha acentuado el debate en torno al tema. Actualmente, este debate se denomina 'el problema de la interfaz'. En resumen, el problema de la interfaz se refiere al cometido desempeñado por el conocimiento implícito o explícito en la adquisición de conocimiento y en si hay interacción entre ambos. Tradicionalmente, el problema ha sido analizado desde el punto de vista de la adquisición de lenguas, pero también puede ser analizado desde el punto de vista de la enseñanza: ¿Se asume en la docencia –conscientemente o no– que dicha interfaz existe, es decir, que el conocimiento implícito y explícito interaccionan entre sí? Para contestar a esta pregunta, es necesario diseñar un constructo que permita descubrir el potencial de las actividades docentes para promover la enseñanza explícita o implícita, o ambas. La elaboración de tal constructo debería basarse en la definición previa y en la identificación de las características operativas del conocimiento explícito e implícito en cuanto aplicados a los materiales usados para la enseñanza de lenguas. Creemos que tal constructo es posible y presentamos una propuesta basada en las razones expuestas a lo largo del trabajo.*

Palabras clave: Conocimiento explícito/implícito, adquisición de segundas lenguas, enseñanza explícita/implícita, ELT, FLT

ABSTRACT

*Since Krashen (1981, 1982) raised the question of 'learning' vs. 'acquisition', an increasingly hot debate has gained momentum in SLA. Such a debate is referred to in the literature as the 'interface issue'. Briefly, the*

*interface issue is centered on the role that the explicit and implicit components may play in knowledge acquisition and on whether there is any kind of interaction between them. This issue has been traditionally analysed from the point of view of SLA, but it could also be viewed from the perspective of FLT: do FLT materials also assume the interface position – consciously or not– and are they built on the assumption that explicit and implicit knowledge really interact with each other? In order to answer this question a construct should be designed to discover the potential of teaching activities to promote explicit or implicit teaching, or both. The elaboration of such a construct should be based on a previous definition and identification of the operational features of explicit and implicit knowledge as applied to FLT materials. Our stand is that such a construct is feasible. We offer here the outline of a proposal based on the rationale presented along the paper.*

Keywords: Explicit/implicit knowledge, SLA, ELT/FLT materials

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The question whether second languages are 'learnt' or 'acquired' has puzzled many scholars in the last thirty years or so (Krashen, 1982; Gass & Selinker, 2001; N. Ellis, 2008; R. Ellis, 1994, among others). The 'interface issue' is precisely about how language acquisition is finally achieved. Following Krashen's dichotomy (Krashen, 1981, 1982), 'acquisition' implies linguistic competence (as native speakers do have), while 'learning' is the conscious and explicit knowledge of the linguistic system, which does not imply fluency and communicative efficiency.

Current SLA studies have often pivoted around the role of explicit learning in language acquisition (Sharwood Smith, 1991; DeKeyser, 2003; N. Ellis, 2005; R. Ellis, 2009). The teaching tradition has taken advantage of explicit and implicit knowledge in the classroom. Even more, most traditional approaches (Grammar Translation Method) are heavily based on explicit teaching. On the other hand, even those methods that have banned explicit teaching (the Direct Method, the Audiolingual Method) cannot be said to exclude explicitness in the classroom; many teachers -consciously or not- have very often included information on the linguistic system while attempting to follow the 'natural way of learning' (Sánchez,

2009). Explicitness in fact may not be obviously or overtly presented, but it may lie at the foundations of the texts used in different ways: in the way they are selected, or in the way they are arranged and exploited in the classroom. The analysis of teaching materials is a measure of how much explicit teaching there is in the classroom (Criado Sánchez, 2010). Consequently, the interface issue does not only affect SLA, but also FLT (Foreign Language Teaching). Instruction –it is assumed– has an effect on learning. If this is so, explicit and/or implicit language teaching may have an effect on language learning and deserves more attention.

## 2. THE INTERFACE ISSUE

The interface issue in SLA refers to the way researchers describe how implicit and explicit knowledge can interface or interact with each other in order for the learner to achieve linguistic competence. Linguistic competence is usually associated with the fluent use of the language in communication, very much as native speakers do. This modality of linguistic knowledge is said to have been 'acquired', as opposed to the kind of linguistic knowledge resulting from second language teaching, heavily depending on the conscious use of the target linguistic system, which is said to have been 'learnt'. Hence, the dichotomy 'learning' versus 'acquisition'.

Since achieving implicit linguistic knowledge is the end goal, it is of paramount importance to identify and follow the most adequate path to reach that goal. In natural environments, implicit knowledge is typically the result of exposure to the linguistic input; it results from a bottom-up process (‘exemplar-based’ knowledge. Roher, 2008:68). Does explicit teaching as well have a direct bearing on achieving implicit knowledge?

Succinctly, explicitness refers to conscious and declarative knowledge, that is, knowledge we can verbalize, explain or talk about. This is the kind of knowledge underlying, for example, the explanation of the rules of the language, or when we give details on the meaning of specific words. Implicit knowledge is associated with non-conscious knowledge, automatic or proceduralized, that is, knowledge we can perform and acquire with no awareness. Since

implicit knowledge proceeds automatically, with no resort to conscious intervention, it is quick, efficient, not subject to change or arbitrary variation. Most common and basic actions in our daily life (such as walking or driving) result from implicit processes. This is also the kind of knowledge that supports the use of our native language in normal or daily communicative situations.

Krashen (1981, 1982) overtly states that explicit knowledge does not 'mix' or interact with implicit knowledge in any way. One may know a lot about the language and not be able to use it in communicative situations. Krashen is the most outstanding exponent of the *non-interface position*. The position in favour of interaction between both types of knowledge has spread and popularized, especially in the field of cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics (Anderson, 1982, 2005), and later on has also gained adepts in SLA (DeKeyser, 2007). They represent the *interface position*, which claims some kind of interaction between explicit and implicit knowledge (Berry & Broadbent, 1988; N. Ellis, 2007; R. Ellis, 2006; Sharwood-Smith, 1993, among others). The extent of such an interaction is differently perceived and has opened a debate along the line of a weak and a strong interface. The length of this paper does not allow for a detailed analysis of each position (see Dornyei, 2009: 159ff).

We take here the stand of those that accept some kind of interaction –of a varied intensity, depending on specific circumstances– between explicit and implicit knowledge. More in detail, we understand such an interaction in the sense that awareness on the linguistic system, followed or accompanied by exposure to input and practice, may contribute to consolidate implicit knowledge. Mere explicit knowledge however would not be sufficient for that purpose.

The rationale behind our stand is grounded on two bases, (i) recent research on cognitive science, and (ii) the pedagogic and classroom practice throughout the centuries. Cognitive science (Dörnyei, 2009; Ingram, 2007) studies the brain as the physical entity where knowledge is located, and investigates the nature and operation of the processes that take place in the neural system while learning. Neurolinguistics is shedding some new light on how knowledge is acquired, and how it is consolidated in the mind. The physical bases

on which knowledge is cemented condition its nature, its acquisition and its potential. The working memory responsible for consciousness is very limited in its extent and power and does not allow for the processing of many elements at the same time. Retrieving data from long-time memory takes time and slows down all cognitive processes depending on it. Proceduralization of knowledge solves those limitations, since awareness is not necessary. In addition to that, neurolinguistics (Ahlsen, 2006; Hazeltine, 2002; Ingram, 2007) tends to support the idea that implicit and explicit knowledge are located in different brain areas, but they apparently share some neural channels and may interact with each other at least in a kind of 'balancing' action (Ullman, 2004). If this is so, cognitive science supports the interface position.

We also take into account the classroom practice throughout the centuries. The promotion of declarative and procedural knowledge is most often found together in activities offering – directly or indirectly – explicit information on the language, but providing at the same time linguistic input (usually non-authentic) and encouraging practice. In this way they combine both kinds of pedagogic action (explicit and implicit) in the same activity.

## 3. THE NATURE OF EXPLICIT AND/OR IMPLICIT KNOWLEDGE

Instruction and learning do not necessarily go together (Schmidt, 1994; R. Ellis, 2009). Teachers however tend to firmly believe that there is a high correlation between teaching and learning, in the sense that what is learnt is what has previously been taught. More research in this field is needed, but the complexity of the explicit and implicit construct makes the task difficult. The study by R. Ellis (2005) attempting to measure explicit and implicit knowledge of a second language points in the right direction.

Scholars agree on some key features for identifying each type of knowledge, which may result in the elaboration of a construct for explicitness or implicitness (see, for example, some fundamental studies in the field of psycholinguistics: Baars, 1988; Berry & Broadbent, 1987, 1988; Reber, 1989, among others). As applied to

knowledge, the explicit construct implies (i) conscious information, that is, information we are aware of; (ii) information we can control; (iii) information we keep in the working memory at a specific moment and is processed there; (iv) information readily available for conscious use; (v) information on which we can apply reasoning; (vi) information subject to variability, some kind of uncertainty or possible inaccuracy and therefore potentially fallible; (vii) access to this kind of information taking some time (since it requires deductive processes, reasoning and the like); (viii) explicit knowledge subject to be verbalized (this is obviously related to awareness and control); (ix) explicit information subject to be learned at any moment or age, depending on the individual capacity.

The implicit construct, on the other hand, involves the opposite: (i) unconscious information, or information we are not aware of (Schmidt, 1990); (ii) information we do not consciously control; (iii) information automatically accessible once specific stimuli are triggered; (iv) information not being readily available for conscious use; (v) information not being subject to reasoning; (vi) information being fully structured and systematic; it should have no flaws, since it is not subject to variability or uncertainty in the execution; (vii) access to this kind of information being quick and automatic; (viii) knowledge not subject to be verbalized, since it is not dependent on consciousness (Paradis, 2009); (ix) information subject to be learned at early age, and its learnability decreases with age.

## 4. EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT TEACHING TECHNIQUES: IN SEARCH OF A MEASURING CONSTRUCT

The features defining explicitness and implicitness (see section 3) could be translated as features of a construct targeted at the identification and measurement of the explicit and/or implicit load of teaching activities. In short, activities promote explicit teaching if they,

(i) offer linguistic information on the formal aspects of the language;

(ii) offer linguistic information readily available for conscious use;
(iii) offer linguistic information on which we can apply reasoning;
(iv) offer explicit information that can be learned at any moment or age, depending on the individual capacity;
(v) primarily focus on form;
(vi) look for linguistic formal accuracy;
(vii) work with non-authentic or overtly manipulated materials (for pedagogical purposes);
(viii) attract the attention of the students to the formal elements highlighted;
(ix) require the use of L1;
(x) entail non-meaningful and/or mechanical repetition;
(xi) aim at the controlled use of the language;
(xii) aim at linguistic production adjusting to rules or patterns previously explained and consciously controlled.

In order to detect these features, activities can be approached from the point of view of the goals they pursue and the strategies through which the goals are to be achieved. Goals may aim "to understand or become aware of the rules of the language", "to offer linguistic information for memorization", "to use the language with formal accuracy", etc. In a similar vein, some other features from above are typical strategies deployed in the classroom, as it is the case of "using the L1", "to manipulate the language presented in order to attract the attention of the students to specific linguistic items or structures", "to mechanically repeat sentences or phrases", etc. Detecting those goals and strategies will determine the explicit and/or implicit load of activities, or their potential for promoting the acquisition of explicit and/or implicit linguistic knowledge.

The delimitation of the explicit and implicit character in activities is not an easy task, among other reasons they often include "combined" pedagogical techniques such as input enhancement or input enrichment/flooding. Reinders & R. Ellis (2009: 282) refer to enriched input as "input where a specific L2 feature occurs with high frequency", while enhanced input is "input where the target feature

has been emphasized in some way -glossing, bolding or underlining" (Reinders & R. Ellis, 2009: 283). Such pedagogical techniques, especially input enhancement, are not overtly explicit but lead to (subliminal) consciousness raising or awareness.

Due to space limitations, we will briefly illustrate how the features listed above and their opposites respectively account for explicitness and implicitness in teaching materials. For that purpose, we will draw on some activities taken from New English File Elementary Student's Book (Unit 7) by Clive Oxenden and Christina Latham-Koenig, O.U.P. (2008). The New English File series are widely used worldwide, and are therefore representative EFL teaching materials. Unit 7 has been selected at random.

The heading of this activity, "Underline the word with a different sound", invites the student to pay attention to the pronunciation of specific words; meaning is not relevant here. Its explicit character (consciousness and awareness raising) is obvious. This one, "Can you say this in English? Say five things that there are in your fridge", is at first sight centred on meaning, but it also serves to attract the attention of the students to the words used for naming specific things (those put in the fridge, which no doubt have been carefully selected according to pedagogical reasons). Consequently, this activity promotes implicit learning in so far as it is focused on meaning, but it also shares some explicit ingredients, since it attempts to condition the learning path of the students by calling their attention to specific lexical elements.

Something similar can be said about this input-enhancement activity: "Read the article again. Underline and learn five new words connected with food or cooking, etc." The five words to be learned belong to a specific semantic field, pre-selected for pedagogical reasons. While comprehension of the article is necessary as a meaning-based activity (exposure to input), specific formal elements (words) are also targeted as students are invited to learn five words related to food.

Explicitness is obvious in this activity, "Look at these sentences. Then complete the rules with can or can't", or in this one: "Listen and practice. Copy the strong and weak forms of can". Input enhancement is perceived in this exercise, "Work in pairs. Take turns to ask and answer questions about your holiday places. Use the phrases from 10b

and 2a". On the one hand, the activity fosters explicit teaching by attracting the students' attention to form, that is, the structures previously explained; the focus is on the repetition of specific sentences, built and presented in order to practice and reinforce the consolidation of specific linguistic structures. On the other hand, the activity also promotes implicitness, given that the students have to offer opinions about a real-life situation (holiday places). This is an example of a communicative drill, which combines attention to both form and meaning, and typically illustrates the 'interface' between explicit and implicit teaching. The activity assumes that attracting the attention of the students to form (structures) while prioritizing attention to meaning will result in more efficient learning.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The previously outlined features, defining the construct of explicitness and implicitness, may easily facilitate the design of a construct precise enough to measure the explicit and/or implicit load of teaching materials. It is to be expected that the explicit and implicit components are not always neatly shaped and delimited in the activities designed. Explicitness and implicitness may appear as complementary to each other, so that if we think of a continuum, the scale should be open to the presence and possible interaction of both explicit and implicit features. This approach is open to the interface issue as applied to teaching materials. Indeed, if explicit teaching should not have any effect on implicit knowledge acquisition, education should be seriously questioned.

We believe this issue to be of great importance in FLT and as such it deserves to be thoroughly studied. In this sense, the identification of the implicit and explicit character of teaching activities may be used as a preliminary and essential phase in future empirical studies testing the efficacy of explicit and implicit teaching. The results may potentially shed light on the most suitable combination between the two in real classrooms.

## NOTES

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