

Can Grammar Be Learned Implicitly? Insights From the Omani EAP Classroom

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Abstract—The focus of this study is on the implicit knowledge that L2 learners acquire when they are asked to complete a communicative task. The study is couched within the framework of the Instructed Second Language Learning (ISLA) and contributes to the discussion on the acquisition of implicit knowledge as an important pre-requisite for communicative competence. The study claims that implicit knowledge can be acquired when language learners are asked to complete a communicative task enriched with the target structure of the English passive. Seventy first year EAP students participated in the study, and they were asked to describe the process of frankincense production in writing based on prompts provided to them. The prompts were developed to elicit the target structure after the participants read a text enriched with the structure of the English passive. The results of the written production task were statistically significant despite the participants' low performance on the task. This suggests the development of implicit knowledge of the target structure that learners tapped into when communicating meaning; however, to achieve better outcomes, it is believed that learners need more tokens of the target structure over time. Future research may investigate the effects of token frequency integrated into a communicative task on the development of implicit knowledge. The study advocates for a change in language learning curricula from instruction structured around grammatical forms to task-based instruction.

Index Terms—implicit knowledge, language forms, instructed second language acquisition, EAP, EAP in Oman

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to report on the results of an empirical study conducted in the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the tertiary level in Oman. Specifically, the study investigates the effectiveness of one type of pedagogical instruction known as Integrated Form-Focused Instruction (INT FFI) on the development of implicit knowledge of EFL learners. By focusing on this particular instructional strategy, the study situates itself within the broader framework of the Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA).

II. INSTRUCTED SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION (ISLA): LITERATURE REVIEW

Loewen and Sato (2017) state that Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA) is a theoretically and empirically informed field of research that investigates the effectiveness of instruction on the acquisition of an additional language (L2). Instruction is defined as the systematic manipulation of language learning processes and the conditions under which they take place. ISLA differs from uninstructed (second language) L2 learning, which occurs in naturalistic settings when L2 learners acquire their additional languages without any type of formal instruction. Typically, uninstructed L2 learners develop a certain level of language proficiency that enables them to function effectively within a target community (e.g., Bengali expat community in the Sultanate of Oman that in addition to their mother tongue, use English or Arabic to communicate with Omanis and other expat communities that reside in Oman). Thus, instructed and uninstructed L2 learning constitute two distinct processes. Given that the context of the present study is the EAP classroom located in the Sultanate of Oman, the literature review in this section is limited to the discussion of selected research that focuses on instructed L2 learning only.

Since the goal of ISLA is the acquisition of an L2, first, it is important to understand what counts as a successful acquisition of an L2. In other words, what does it mean to successfully acquire an L2? In the era of communicative language teaching (CLT) (Council of Europe, 2025; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Spada, 2007), successful L2 acquisition is defined as the ability to communicate meaning, which is known as communicative competence. Communicative competence is a theoretical construct, upon which many language standards for L2 teaching, learning, and assessment are built. For example, the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs), a nationwide standard used in Canada for teaching, learning, and assessment, defines communicative competence as the ability to “communicate: to interact, to express, to

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interpret and to negotiate meaning, and to create discourse in a variety of social contexts and situations” (Center for Canadian Benchmarks, 2012, p. VI). Moreover, communicative competence is a complex construct that includes different types of knowledge (e.g., linguistic, discourse, strategic), competency areas (e.g., Sharing/Comprehending Information), and language skills. The CLB document states that language forms (grammar, sounds) require some form of explicit instruction; however, this should not be the primary goal of language teaching and learning. Instead, the focus on language forms should be guided by real-world tasks and their social contexts. In this framework, communicative ability always takes priority over language forms. If the goal of successful L2 learning is the acquisition of communicative competence (i.e. the ability to communicate effectively), the next question that arises here is: What type of instruction would facilitate this acquisition?

To answer this question, research on ISLA (e.g., Ellis et al., 2009; Loewen, 2021; Rebuschat, 2013) has investigated the extent to which explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge that L2 learners acquire during instructions facilitate the acquisition of communicative competence. Rebuschat (2013, p. 597) makes the following distinction between explicit and implicit knowledge.

Implicit learning generally occurs without the intention to learn and without awareness of what has been learned, that is, learners are often un-aware of having acquired knowledge. Explicit learning is the learning process that results primarily in conscious knowledge. This is usually associated with intentional learning conditions.

Based on this definition, explicit knowledge is intentionally acquired and thus represents conscious knowledge. For instance, metalinguistic knowledge about language constitutes explicit knowledge. In contrast, when L2 learners are capable of expressing themselves without being consciously aware of language forms that are used to convey the meaning, they are believed to have access to implicit knowledge in spontaneous, real-time communication.

Over the years, research (e.g., Williams & Rebuschat, 2023) has raised many questions about the interaction between these two types of knowledge. Some researchers (e.g., Krashen, VanPatten) believe that explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge represent two distinct types of knowledge and therefore, they do not interface. In fact, Van Patten argues (Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021a, 2021b) that implicit knowledge is the only knowledge that contributes to the development of communicative competence. The proponents of the weak interface between explicit and implicit knowledge recognize the distinct nature of both (Loewen, 2021) by acknowledging that not all explicit knowledge contributes to the development of the abilities to communicate in L2. However, under certain conditions, explicit knowledge can become implicit and thus can contribute to the acquisition of communicative competence. According to Loewen (2021), these conditions are: (i) the availability of L2 input that is enriched with targeted language forms; (ii) the availability of form-focused instruction and corrective feedback when learners actively negotiate for meaning; (iii) the availability of output that is viewed not as a byproduct of communication, but rather as means to acquire communicative competence.

There is a different approach to ISLA that advocates for no focus on form activities where L2 learners’ attention is drawn to meaning rather than forms in tasks that have to be completed. For example, Ellis believes that no form-focused activities are necessary. According to Ellis, while working on communicative tasks, learners acquire L2 experientially through learning how to communicate in their L2s (Ellis, 2005; Ellis et al., 2009). As a proponent of task-based learning where meaning is always prioritized over language forms, Ellis argues that learners can discover patterns and rules of L2 without the intention of learning them because their attentional resources are allocated to meaning. The discovery of language patterns and rules happens when L2 learners complete communicative tasks enriched with targeted language forms; however, no explicit instruction on those language forms is necessary.

One of the empirical studies that investigates the relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge and their contribution to the development of communicative competences is Spada et al. (2014). Spada et al. supports the view that explicit knowledge under some conditions can become implicit if it is followed by communicative practice. (See also DeKeyser & Suzuki, 2025, although there are some differences in terminology because DeKeyser uses the terms declarative and procedural knowledge instead of explicit and implicit knowledge.) The uniqueness of Spada et al.’s study is that it investigates the timing of form-focused instruction within a communicative lesson plan. In other words, the study raises the following question: What is the optimal time to focus learners’ attention to form within a communicative lesson?

To answer this question, two types of instruction were proposed (see also Spada & Lightbown, 2011) and their contribution to the explicit and implicit knowledge. These instructions are Isolated Form-Focused Instruction (ISO FFI) and Integrated Form-Focused Instruction (INT FFI). In a quasi-experimental classroom study, both types of instruction have activities that focus learners’ attention to language forms; however, ISO FFI and INT FFI differ in the timing when this focus on form happens. In ISO FFI, focus on form takes place when a language form is isolated from a communicative activity, and can happen before, during or after an activity. ISO FFI may include teacher-led instruction, corrective feedback or enhanced input that facilitates L2 learners’ noticing of the language forms they need to communicate meaning. 4 teachers and 109 intermediate adult L2 learners enrolled in a non-credit language program in Canada participated in the study. Out of 4 classes, 2 classes received ISO FFI and two classes received INT FFI. The ISO FFI and INT FFI lessons had the same communicative theme of health; however, they were different in how attention was drawn to the target structure of the English passive, that is separately from or integrated with the

communicative context. An error correction task (ECT) and an oral production task (OPT) were used in the study to investigate the effectiveness of ISO FFI and INT FFI in the acquisition of the English passive. These tasks were designed to tap into different types of knowledge, ECT to explicit knowledge and OPT to implicit knowledge.

The findings of the study showed significant improvement for learners who have experienced ISO FFI and INT FFI lessons. The differences were found in the participants' performance on the tasks. Thus, L2 learners who received ISO FFI improved on the decontextualized error correction task than L2 learners who received INT FFI. L2 learners who received INT FFI improved more on the OPT. The results showed that these two types of instruction are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. There is also a tentative finding that these types of instruction tap into different kinds of knowledge, ISO into explicit knowledge and INT into implicit.

More research is needed to investigate explicit and implicit knowledge, as well as the conditions under which L2 learners can develop implicit knowledge of L2 language forms. The current study aims to address this gap in the literature.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

The study aims to investigate the effect of implicit learning on the acquisition of the English passive. Specifically, the question is: Can L2 learners use the structure of the English passive in a written production task of describing a process without any explicit instruction? Is it possible to acquire a grammatical structure implicitly within the context of a communicative task?

B. Participants

Seventy first-year university students, with an average age of 19.5, took part in the study. Their level of language proficiency was determined based on the results of the mandatory test that the students had to take at the end of their year in the Foundation Program. The Foundation Program is a bridging program that assists students in developing academic skills required for entering their respective majors at the university. The Program includes instructions in mathematics, IT, and academic English. The required level to enter the university is the IELTS Band 4.5-5. The students enrolled in the two first-year EAP university courses were randomly selected for the study. The target structure was the English Passive, as one of the grammatical structures included in the course syllabus.

C. Treatment

The communicative lesson plan was developed to introduce the target structure of the English passive implicitly while the participants worked on reading comprehension. During the lesson the participants first practiced the key vocabulary included in the reading passage titled "We love Oman: The Land of Frankincense" and then were asked to read the text. The reading passage was enriched with the target structure of the English passive and included sentences similar to *Frankincense is also known for its healing and restorative properties. The best quality of frankincense is found in the Dhofar region and is abundantly sold in the souqs.* (For the full text, please refer to Appendix A). No explicit instruction on the target structure of the English passive was given to the students during the lesson. Thus, the attentional resources of the students were allocated to understanding the main ideas of the text and completing the task of creating mind maps that captured those ideas. Once the students presented and discussed their mind maps, they were told that their next task would be to describe the process of how frankincense is made. The participants were asked first to watch a video that explains the process of frankincense production (YouTube, n.d.) and then write a step-by-step description of the process based on the information presented in the video and the vocabulary prompts provided to them. The prompts were structured to elicit the use of the English passive, e.g. *small, careful cuts/ into the bark of Boswellia trees/ make; a gummy, milky white resin/ produce* (please refer to Appendix B for a full list of the prompts). The students were asked to submit their descriptions to the course instructor. No corrective feedback on the target structure of the English passive was provided to the participants.

IV. RESULTS

The results of the participants' performance were analyzed. To determine what constitutes the correct use of the English Passive in the written production task, the sentence, such as *Then the resin often sold at Hafa souq in Salalah* was considered ungrammatical. The sentences similar to the sentence *The scraped resin is then separate into different grades* was considered grammatical. In other words, if a student made an attempt to use the correct structure of the English passive *to be + past participle*, however, made an error in the use of the past participle, this sentence was considered to be a target-like sentence.

The results of the study show that the average score across seventy students was 5.3. This suggests that the overall participants' performance is moderately above the midpoint. To decide whether or not the average score of 5.3 obtained on the productive task was statistically significant, that is significantly different from what is expected by random chance, a one-sample t-test was conducted. The test value was set at 4.5 that represents the expected score if the participants were guessing randomly. It was calculated as follows: 18 items x 25% probability of success. The results of

the t-test indicated that the mean score ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.76$) was significantly greater than the test value of 4.50, $t(69) = 3.81$, $p < .001$. The effect size was medium to large, Cohen's $d = 0.46$.

The results show that as a group the participants were not guessing. They demonstrated the correct use of the English passive in a productive writing task. The average score of 5.3 represents a real, measurable performance above what would be expected by random chance. The results also show that the participants performed better than guessing; however, this result does not mean that they have mastered the material, i.e. internalized the structure of the English passive.

V. DISCUSSION

The study raised the question of whether or not it is possible to acquire the structure of the English passive without any explicit instruction. The results of the study showed that the participants were able to use the target form in a written production task of describing a process. These findings are in line with research that investigates the effectiveness of task-based instruction in the development of implicit knowledge (e.g., Ellis et al., 2019). However, the results of the study also showed that the medium rate of the participants' performance on the task was low and only slightly above the chance level. This considerably low albeit statistically significant rate of the participants' performance should not be taken as an indicator of lack of implicit knowledge of the target structure of the English passive. One possible explanation of the low rate could be the token frequency of the target structure of the English passive used in the input. This can simply mean that the participants need more exposure to the target structure over time in order to use it effectively in a productive communicative task and in spontaneous communication. One might even argue that if the participants had more exposure to the target structure, their overall performance could have been better. The importance of input has been emphasized by Lichtman and VanPatten (2021b, p. 338) in their statement that "all (largely comprehensible) input is beneficial, not just that embedded in interaction, as long as the primary intent of the learner is to interpret meaning (i.e., comprehend something)." Thus, it is possible to assume that if L2 learners were exposed to many different, level-appropriate communicative events over time, there would be improvement in the development of their abilities to use the target structure effectively in communication.

One of the implications of the findings of this research is that the study emphasizes the importance of communicative tasks in developing L2 learners' abilities to communicate meaning. An argument has been made in the literature about the importance of developing the language learning curricula around themes/questions, tasks, and projects that would provide rich input for L2 learners (for a sample of how these tasks can be developed, see Clarke & Hastings, 2019). Therefore, by showing that learners can acquire implicit knowledge, this paper is a call for change in the Omani language classroom towards emphasizing implicit knowledge over explicit learning of language forms.

This study has several limitations that should be considered while interpreting the study results. First, the study uses only one assessment instrument. The written production task used in the study may not capture the full range of the participants' implicit knowledge. Second, the chance level benchmark of 4.50 while statistically justified represents a conservative estimate that may not fully account for the complexity of random responding in the task.

Future research can focus on the development of implicit knowledge over time and the effects of token frequency and the structure of the communicative task in the development of implicit knowledge.

VI. CONCLUSION

The focus of this study is on the implicit knowledge that L2 learners acquire when they are asked to complete a communicative task. The results show that the participants demonstrated implicit knowledge of the target structure of the English passive at a slightly above chance level. This low albeit statistically significant participants' performance on the task can be due to the insufficient number of tokens of the target form. Thus, the argument is made in favor of providing L2 learners with many types of communicative tasks that are enriched with target forms to be acquired by L2 learners. The study also argues for changing the focus of the curricula built around language forms to be taught explicitly to curricula that are structured around tasks and projects that facilitate the acquisition of implicit knowledge that is needed for effective communication in spontaneous real-life situations.

APPENDIX A. READING COMPREHENSION TASK

We love Oman: The land of frankincense. (Times News Service, 2020)



Task: Read the text. Based on the reading passage develop a mind map that captures the main ideas of the text.

Key vocabulary

Frankincense (frankincense trail), to be an integral part of something, heritage, resin, heal, restore (healing & restorative), abundantly, alluvial bed of the wadi (alluvium is a type of soil), embodiment of culture, incense, flourish

Frankincense is an integral part of Oman's culture and heritage. This aromatic resin **is** mostly **used** in incense and perfume. The resin **is obtained** from the tree bark of genus *Boswellia*. Frankincense **is** also **known** for its healing and restorative properties. The origin of Frankincense can **be traced** back to the Arabian Peninsula.

Oman **is known** to produce the world's finest frankincense. The best quality of frankincense **is found** in the Dhofar region and **is** abundantly **sold** in the souqs. Hafa Souq in Salalah is an exclusive place that sells it. Oman's frankincense trail in Dhofar region **was visited** by explorers Marco Polo and Lawrence of Arabia. The frankincense tree (*boswellia sacra*) can still **be found** in Wadi Dawkah. The trees grow in the alluvial bed of the wadi under the extreme heat of this region.

According to Oman's Ministry of Tourism, "Frankincense is a symbol of life, or rather it is life itself, for the Dhofari people. It is not a mere tree, but an embodiment of culture, history, sociology and geography. The Omani researcher and historian, Abdul Qadir bin Salim Al Ghassani, mentions in his book 'Dhofar, the Land of Frankincense' that huge quantities of incense **were imported** by Alexander the Great from Arab lands. In ancient times the Frankincense Trail **was considered** to be the most important commercial route throughout southern Arabia. Other sources suggest that frankincense **was used** round the throne of King Solomon as incense. In the present time, we know that this incense **is used** at the Vatican in Rome".

The Land of Frankincense in Al Baleed in Salalah **is recognized** by UNESCO as one of its World Heritage Sites. The Museum of the Land of Frankincense **is located** in the region of Al Baleed in Salalah and borders the ruins of Al Baleed Archaeological Park. Visitors can discover how trade with Frankincense and maritime strength ensured that the region flourished in the 12th century. Still used in important ceremonies, frankincense also remains a symbol of Omani hospitality. Its fragrant resin **is still burned** today throughout the Sultanate to welcome guests.

APPENDIX B. DESCRIBING THE PROCESS

Task: How is Frankincense produced?

Watch the video (YouTube, n.d.) and describe the process of frankincense production.

The sentences below will help you in your description of this process.

1. Resin of the special tree/ harvest
2. The bark of the tree/ scrape with a knife
3. Then the resin/ dry and sell at Hafa souk in Salalah
4. Many things/ derive from the special resin
5. Frankincense oil/ extract/ through distillation
6. The resin/ boil/ chemists in the lab to extract its essences
7. It is then bottle/ to be/ sell in the US and beyond
8. A tiny flask of perfume/ sell for \$50 in the US
9. The white, sometimes greenish resin/ separate
10. It/ think to be a good medicine to help with gastro-intestinal and other illnesses

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