

Investigations in Instructed Second Language Acquisition



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edited by

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Preface

This volume grew out of a Colloquium on “*Instructed Second Language Learning/L’appropriation d’une langue seconde en milieu guidé*” organized by the editors of this volume in Brussels in August 2004. The purpose of the colloquium was to assess the impact of the ‘new wave’ of multidisciplinary research on second language acquisition (SLA) in instructional settings for theory, methodology, and practice. This volume captures the spirit of the conference participants’ free exchange of ideas and goes substantially beyond that event. We asked the presenters to update, revise and expand their papers, and we also invited additional contributions, in an effort to present complementary, multiple perspectives on the investigation of instructed second language acquisition (ISLA). All the papers submitted for inclusion in this book went through a rigorous review process. As it stands, the volume brings together recent work, both empirical and theoretical, on aspects of learning, processing and use of a second language in a variety of instructional settings, including foreign language classes, intensive second language classes, immersion programmes, and content-and-language-integrated learning environments. The introductory chapter provides a brief overview of the assumptions that underlie research on ISLA, followed by a discussion of factors that may determine the process of instructed second language acquisition and its possible outcomes. The next seventeen chapters report theoretical and empirical work in this field. Data-based studies in this book deal with the acquisition of specific linguistic phenomena (e.g. verb and noun morphology, lexicon, clause structures) in a range of target languages (e.g. English, French, German, Russian). Several of the chapters deal with the role of form-focused and meaning-focused instruction in L2 learning, but other issues such as the role of cross-linguistic influence, awareness, implicit and explicit processing mechanisms, memory and the properties of classroom input are also discussed. Although the interest in instruction in this volume is acquisitional rather than pedagogical, and all the chapters address theoretical questions, several also consider pedagogical implications for language educators. As such we believe that this volume will prove a valuable resource for researchers in SLA, psycholinguistics, linguistics and language pedagogy.

Alex Housen

Michel Pierrard

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Investigating Instructed Second Language Acquisition

Alex Housen and Michel Pierrard

1. Introduction

Most SLA research makes a basic distinction between *uninstructed* (*naturalistic, spontaneous, unguided, untutored, informal*) second language acquisition (SLA) and *instructed* (or *guided, tutored, formal*) second language acquisition, according to whether the second language (L2) is learned through spontaneous communication in authentic social situations or under pedagogical guidance (Ellis 1985, 1994; Klein 1986; McLaughlin 1987; Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991)¹. The practical validity of this distinction may seem unquestionable but it is unclear whether instructed and uninstructed SLA are really different processes and opinions in the literature on this point differ widely.

At one extreme, there is the view that instructed and uninstructed SLA are fundamentally different processes. The best-known proponent of this view is Krashen who proposed the dichotomy between uninstructed L2 *acquisition* versus instructed L2 *learning* and rejected the possibility of an interface between the two types (Krashen 1981, 1985). Instruction, Krashen argues, leads to learned conscious knowledge, which is available to the learner as a monitor for checking the form of utterances once they have been generated by the acquired subconscious knowledge system. Krashen rules out the possibility of instruction intervening in the acquisition process as it proceeds along some fixed natural order. Often the implication here is that the only ‘real’ SLA – or at least the only kind of SLA that merits the researcher’s attention – is uninstructed SLA; that is, SLA uncontaminated by the intervention and control exerted by the classroom, instructor or textbook. This bias is made explicit in the following quote: “What happens in school has very little to do with language learning. Language can’t be taught. It can only be learned. People learn language in spite of what goes on in the classroom” (cited in Wong-Fillmore 1989: 315).

At the other extreme, there are those who claim that SLA always involves the same basic processes, regardless of context: “It is difficult to imagine a situation in which the fundamental processes involved in learning a non-primary language would depend on the context in which the language is learned ... All learners have the capability of taking information from the input and organising it within the framework of their current linguistic system and modifying and restructuring that system” (Gass 1989: 498; see Felix 1981 or Bardovi-Harlig 2000, for similar views).

These two seemingly opposing views both in fact regard SLA as an essentially self-contained process that follows its own course, a process neither dependent on nor influenced by external factors. Thus, as Van Patten observes, “it is what [a] learner does that is common to all contexts which forms the core of SLA theory” (Van Patten 1990: 25).

Although extremes of opinion do exist, it would be true to say that most SLA researchers nowadays, including the contributors to the present volume, would consider them misguided or at least premature. Instead, SLA is typically considered to be a process which is open to the influence of instruction. What is not fully understood is exactly how, and to what extent, the process can be influenced. It was these crucial research questions which provided the starting point for the studies in this volume.

2. Investigating Instructed Second Language Acquisition

In order to find out if and how instructed and uninstructed SLA differ, we have to be more specific about what we understand by *instruction*. As will be apparent from the contributions to this volume, instruction is not a unitary concept and the term is used to mean different things depending on the theoretical perspective and research focus. For current purposes therefore, we define instruction as *any systematic attempt to enable or facilitate language learning by manipulating the mechanisms of learning and/or the conditions under which these occur*. This broad definition allows for a wide range of instructional approaches, methods, strategies, techniques, practices and activities, all of which can be applied in a wide range of settings (typically a classroom). Thus institutionalized forms of L2 instruction and methods of training are obviously included; but so are individualized L2 instruction, self-study, computer-assisted instruction and the use of audio-visual and electronic learning materials.

The study of Instructed Second Language Acquisition (henceforth *ISLA*) is motivated by several concerns.

First, ISLA merits our attention because it is an important social phenomenon. An ever-increasing number of people, particularly in the developed world, are learning a second language at least partially through instruction, mainly in the controlled environment of a classroom. Indeed, *instructed* L2 acquisition may well be the predominant mode of SLA, more so than *naturalistic* L2 acquisition. Consequently the study of ISLA has great descriptive value and ecological validity.

Secondly, the study of ISLA also has applied value, especially for language education. L2 learning and L2 teaching are both highly complex tasks that require much time, effort and resources from the learner, the instructor, and the community. Insights from ISLA research can reveal the complexity of these tasks and contribute to improvements in instructional practice.

Finally, the study of ISLA has theoretical value. It calls for a consideration of a wide range of theoretical issues pertaining to the nature of language, language learning, language knowledge and language processing, and the relationships between them. The SLA community needs answers to a range of fundamental questions, including the following:

1. What is the nature of the *learning mechanisms* involved in instructed SLA and how do they differ from the learning mechanisms at work in uninstructed SLA? For instance, is there a basis (cognitive, linguistic or neurological) for distinctions commonly made between *acquisition* and *learning*, between *implicit* and *explicit learning*?
2. What is the nature of the *L2 knowledge* that instructed L2 learners develop, and how does it differ from the L2 knowledge that develops in naturalistic, uninstructed SLA? This question takes in issues such as the nature of metalinguistic knowledge and the status of distinctions such as implicit versus explicit language knowledge and procedural versus declarative knowledge.
3. What is the nature of *L2 performance and L2 processing* in instructed L2 contexts? This question addresses the distinction between controlled versus automatic processing, the nature and role of monitoring and planning, and the effect of task type on L2 performance.
4. What is the nature of *L2 instruction*? Various types of instruction are currently distinguished in the literature, including consciousness raising, input flooding, input enhancement, focus-on-form, focus-on-

formS, instruction as the provision of comprehensible input or of positive and negative evidence, instruction as providing strategies for input processing, and so forth. What do these different forms of instruction have in common and how do they differ?

These issues are clearly related and cannot be investigated in isolation. We need to understand how they interact, or in other words:

5. What is the *relationship between instruction, acquisition, knowledge and processing in an L2 and how do they interact?* What variables intervene to constrain this interaction (e.g. age, cognitive maturity, motivation, first language background, the nature of the L2 features targeted by instruction)? In dealing with this more complex question, we need to address issues such as “What type of instruction leads to what kind of knowledge and how is this knowledge activated in subsequent L2 processing”?

Any attempt to find answers to these questions makes the lamentable inadequacy of a uni-disciplinary approach quickly apparent. Each major issue raises a whole host of related questions, as we will see below, where we examine in more detail just one of the issues raised above and one which many consider to be the core issue of ISLA research: the role of instruction in SLA.

3. Investigating the role of instruction

The role and effects of instruction in SLA have always been controversial: Does instruction really enable SLA, or at least facilitate it? Language teachers have (perhaps obviously) always believed that instruction enables, or at least facilitates language acquisition, but SLA researchers have sometimes been less certain. Early reviews of research on the role of instruction on SLA found it useful to consider its effect in terms of the route, rate and end-state of L2 acquisition (e.g. Long 1983; Chaudron 1988; Ellis 1984, 1985, 1990; Harley 1988). The mainly descriptive research suggested that instruction could positively affect the rate and end-state of acquisition but not its route. In other words, instructed learners would progress faster and ultimately attain higher levels of proficiency than uninstructed L2 learners but both instructed and non-instructed learners would proceed through the same stages and sequences of acquisition, suggesting that instructional intervention is incapable of overriding certain ‘natural’ mechanisms and universal predispositions operative in SLA.

The findings of more experimental research offered a slightly different picture. For instance, early experimental research on the Teachability Hypothesis (Pienemann 1984, 1987a,b) suggested that the natural developmental sequence cannot be altered by instruction for elements of language whose acquisition is governed by universal processing constraints but that other, variational features of language can in principle be successfully taught at any stage of development. Similarly, research inspired by markedness theories suggested that instruction can lead learners to skip stages in a developmental sequence if the instruction is targeted at the more marked forms in an implicationally related hierarchy of forms such as relative clause structures (Gass 1982; Eckman, Bell & Nelson 1988; Ammar & Lightbown, this volume). More recent research on the nature and role of instruction, as reviewed in Norris & Ortega (2000) and Ellis (2001, 2002), paints an even more complex picture. This recent research suggests that any attempt to understand the role of instruction should not treat it as a unitary concept but rather as a cover for a wide range of activities and practices differing along a number of dimensions and potentially affecting different aspects of L2 learning, L2 competence and L2 performance.

In the following sections, we propose a framework for describing the role of instruction in SLA. This framework includes both (a) the nature of the effects of instruction on SLA and (b) the factors which mediate these effects and hence, the effectiveness of instruction.

3.1. Effects of instruction

A proper understanding of the role of instruction in SLA requires a certain clarity about the variegated effects which instruction may have on SLA. These effects can be envisaged in terms of (1) the basic dimensions of SLA, (2) the basic components of SLA, (3) the major processes of SLA and (4) the different types of knowledge which instructed L2 learners develop. These four factors are briefly elucidated below.

First, instruction can, at least in principle, affect any one of the three *basic dimensions* of the language learning process (Klein 1986; Ellis 1994):

- it may affect the *route of acquisition* (i.e. instructed learners may internalise the various features of the target language in a different order from non-instructed learners);

- it may affect the *rate* of language learning (i.e. accelerate or slow it down);
- it may affect *ultimate levels of attainment* and the ‘*end-state*’ of learning (i.e. instructed language learners may ultimately reach either higher or lower stages of development, or attain higher or lower levels of proficiency than non-instructed learners).

Secondly, in terms of the *basic components* of SLA (Klein 1986; Ellis 1994), instruction can be viewed as doing one or several of the following:

- instruction can provide learners with *exposure* to the target language (i.e. input and output opportunities) which is otherwise insufficiently available;
- instruction can influence learners’ *propensity* to use and learn the target language (e.g. by stimulating their motivation);
- instruction can trigger *learning processes and mechanisms* which are otherwise insufficiently activated (e.g. automatization processes, restructuring of linguistic representations).

Thirdly, for the purpose of describing the role of instruction, the third component listed above, L2 learning processes, can be envisaged as comprising three broad *types of processes*: *knowledge internalisation*, *knowledge modification* and *knowledge consolidation*. The goals and effects of instruction can be accordingly characterized as follows:

- instruction may enable learners to *internalize* new L2 knowledge (so that they become *more elaborate* L2 users with, for example, a richer vocabulary and more complex grammar);
- instruction may enable learners to *modify (restructure)* their L2 knowledge and performance, particularly the deviant, non-targetlike aspects of their knowledge and performance (so that they become *more accurate*);
- instruction may enable learners to *consolidate* their L2 knowledge (so that they can use the L2 with greater ease and for a wider range of tasks and functions, in short, so that they become *more fluent* language users).

An important issue here is the role of *consciousness* and *attention* in the process(es) of language learning. Recent research has defined consciousness as *awareness* and has argued that the acquisition of language knowledge involves the allocation of attentional resources to language features in the

input. Simply stated, “people learn about the things that they attend to and do not learn much about the things that they do not attend to” (Schmidt 2001: 30). Depending on the type and amount of attentional resources allocated, different levels of awareness are distinguished, ranging from *perception* and *detection*, to *noticing* and finally to *understanding* language features (Schmidt 1995; Robinson 1996; De Graaff 1997).² The distinction between these different mental operations is scalar, rather than categorical. The critical level of awareness for language learning is *noticing*: “intake is that part of the input that the learner notices” (Schmidt 1990: 139). Consciousness as awareness at the level of rule understanding is considered merely facilitative of attempts to learn. In this view then, the primary role of instruction is as a means for promoting noticing of relevant language features.

The noticing/understanding distinction is related to the distinction between *implicit* and *explicit* learning familiar from research in experimental psychology (e.g. Reber 1993). In contrast to Krashen who considered (implicit) *acquisition* and (explicit) *learning* as fundamentally different, other researchers view implicit and explicit learning as fundamentally similar processes, as both involve the allocation of attentional resources to input and both result in memorial representations of input features (Robinson 1996). The distinction between implicit and explicit learning is defined at the level of their different resultant knowledge bases, as determined by the conditions under which the learning occurs and the type of input provided.

This leads us to the fourth and final way in which the goals and effects of instruction can be envisaged, namely in terms of the types of language knowledge which it promotes. The most common distinctions in SLA research are between *implicit* and *explicit* knowledge and *declarative* and *procedural* knowledge. A survey of the literature on these two distinctions reveals considerable definitional discrepancies (cf. Ellis 1997; Johnson 1996). Implicit knowledge is often characterized as largely *intuitive* and abstract knowledge of language which is *acquired* subconsciously and *incidentally* (typically as a ‘by-product’ of engaging in authentic communication) and which is generally considered as the basis of unplanned, communicative language use. In contrast, explicit knowledge, broadly defined as knowledge *about* language, is a more conscious type of knowledge that is *learned intentionally*. Explicit knowledge can be broken down further into *analysed knowledge* and *metalinguistic knowledge*. Metalinguistic knowledge is verbalized knowledge about the structure and knowledge of language and of the theoretical constructs and technical or semi-technical terminology used to describe it. It is learned through deliberate and conscious (and often

conscientious) study and involves a higher form of awareness than analysed knowledge. Analysed knowledge refers to the extent to which learners are able to form a propositional mental representation of language features and rules. According to Bialystok (1994), analyzed knowledge is derived from implicit knowledge as learners begin to decode their implicit knowledge linguistically so that it becomes represented in a more analytic and symbolic form. Analysed knowledge typically manifests itself in problem-solving language tasks which require learners to pay focal attention to the choice of linguistic forms (as in a cloze task or grammaticality judgement task) though it can also manifest itself intermittently in naturally occurring language behaviour (e.g. in tasks involving decontextualised language use and the manipulation of complex formal schemata). Because this type of knowledge cannot be accessed rapidly, it is normally only activated when there is opportunity for reflection and language planning (*monitoring*).

As said earlier, other researchers distinguish between *declarative* versus *procedural* L2 knowledge, where the former is usually characterized as 'knowing that' and the latter as 'knowing how'. Language learners may first represent a particular language feature as declarative knowledge in memory (e.g. in the form of a set of semantic networks) and then go on to *proceduralize* this declarative knowledge by converting it into mental procedures which can be rapidly activated for processing utterances in spontaneous language use. *Proceduralization* in this sense is similar to the process of *automatisation* and may be seen as part of the sub-process of *knowledge consolidation* mentioned earlier. Although the declarative-procedural distinction is sometimes equated with the implicit-explicit distinction, they are not necessarily the same. Ellis (2001), for example, allows for the possibility of both implicit and explicit knowledge to be available in declarative as well as proceduralized form.

It follows from the above that when one wants to describe the effects of instruction, one has to allow for the possibility that instruction can promote different types of L2 knowledge, including declarative implicit knowledge, procedural implicit knowledge, declarative explicit knowledge, procedural explicit knowledge, analytic explicit knowledge and metalinguistic knowledge.

3.2. Mediating factors

Whatever the nature of the effects, and the effectiveness of instruction for SLA, it seems reasonable to assume that they will be mediated by at least three factors, relating to the *how*, the *what* and the *who* of instruction: (a) the type of instruction provided, (b) the type of language features targeted for instruction, and (c) the type of learner at whom the instruction is targeted (De Graaff 1997; Norris & Ortega 2000; Ellis 2002).

Starting with the learner factor, it is generally assumed – though insufficiently demonstrated – that instruction will have different effects, and hence be more or less effective, depending on the individual learner’s age, cognitive maturity, cognitive style, motivation, personality, language learning aptitude and level of L2 proficiency at the time of instruction (cf. Skehan 1989, 2002; Ranta 2002; Sawyer & Ranta 2001; Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991).

In contrast to the impact of learner variables on the effectiveness of instruction, the mediating role of *type of instruction* has been the focus of much recent SLA research. An initial broad distinction can be made between *Communication-Focused Instruction* and *Form-Focused Instruction* (cf. Ellis 1999). Communication-Focused Instruction (CFI) aims to engage the learner in the active negotiation of meaning and the communicative exchange of authentic messages (Ellis 1999). The theoretical underpinnings of CFI derive from the Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (Krashen 1985) and the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (Swain 1985). CFI assumes that language is best learned through the comprehension of input and through the noticing of form-function mappings which results from the learner’s own attempts to actively negotiate meaning in interaction (Ellis 1999). Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) refers to “any pedagogical effort used to draw the learner’s attention to language form [...]” (Spada 1997: 73). FFI is based on the assumption that certain features of language – grammatical structures but also lexical items, phonological and even sociolinguistic and pragmatic features – can go unnoticed in the input unless the learner’s attention is somehow drawn to them so that he reaches the critical level of awareness (*noticing*) for the features to be internalized (Sharwood Smith 1993; Schmidt 1995). FFI can take many forms. One way of classifying them is in terms of their degree of explicitness: from implicit instructional techniques such as input flooding, input enhancement techniques and recasts to increasingly more explicit techniques like controlled focused exercises, overt error correction and the presentation and discussion of metalinguistic rules (Sharwood Smith 1993). Table 1 contrasts a number of

the attributes associated with implicit and explicit forms of FFI (cf. Norris & Ortega 2000; DeKeyser 1995; Ellis 2001, 2002).

Table 1. Implicit and explicit forms of Form-Focused Instruction

Implicit FFI	Explicit FFI
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>attracts</i> attention to target form • is delivered <i>spontaneously</i> (e.g. in an otherwise communication-oriented activity) • is unobtrusive (minimal interruption of communication of meaning) • presents target forms in context • makes no use of metalanguage • encourages free use of target form 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>directs</i> attention to target form • is <i>predetermined</i> and <i>planned</i> (e.g. as the main focus and goal of a teaching activity) • is obtrusive (interruption of communication of meaning) • presents target forms in isolation • uses metalinguistic terminology (e.g. rule explanation) • involves controlled practice of target form

The distinction between implicit and explicit FFI covers the well-known distinction between respectively *Focus-on-Form* instruction (FonF) and *Focus-on-FormS* instruction (FonFs). According to Long (1991), who introduced this distinction, FonF instruction "...overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (p. 45–46), whereas FonFS "always entails isolation or extraction of linguistic features from context or from communicative activity" (Doughty & Williams 1998a: 3; see also Norris & Ortega 2000: 437–439; Ellis 2001, and the critical discussion by Sheen, this volume).

There are other dimensions along which FFI can vary which cut across the implicit-explicit distinction, such as whether the instruction proceeds deductively or inductively (cf. De Coo 1996; Hendrix, Housen & Pierrard 2002) or whether it is oriented towards the input or towards the learners' own output (cf. Van Patten 1996).

The last set of moderating factors pertains to the particular language feature targeted for instruction. Some language features may be more amenable to instruction (or certain types of instruction) than others but it is unclear what the relevant constraints are. Some researchers have character-