



FROM EXPLANATION TO EXPRESSION: THE ROLE OF SKILL ACQUISITION THEORY IN EXPLICIT AND CONTEXTUAL GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION IN THE ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CONTEXT

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Grammar plays a vital role in English as a Second Language (ESL) education, serving as the foundation for learners to produce accurate and meaningful language. However, Sri Lankan ESL learners, particularly at the secondary level, often struggle to move beyond rule-based understanding towards fluent and spontaneous use of grammatical forms. Traditional explicit grammar instruction, while effective in building declarative knowledge, frequently fails to help learners proceduralize their knowledge in spoken and written communication. Conversely, contextual grammar instruction immerses learners in authentic tasks but may lack the clarity and structure needed for initial comprehension. Therefore, this study investigates the effectiveness of integrating explicit and contextual grammar instruction to enhance grammatical proficiency, drawing on Skill Acquisition Theory (SAT), which outlines three stages in learning: declarative (explicit rule learning), procedural (practice-based application), and automatic (fluent use), using past simple vs. present perfect tenses as the instructional focus. The study adopted a quasi-experimental mixed-methods approach with forty Grade 10 students from a Sri Lankan government school, divided into experimental and control groups. Both groups received explicit instruction on the rules of the target tenses, while the control group practised through repeated drills and the experimental group engaged in contextual grammar tasks. Data were collected through three pre-tests and post-tests, and the test scores were analyzed through descriptive statistics and a paired sample t-test using SPSS. Learners' perceptions were assessed using their reflective journals maintained throughout the treatment period, and relevant entries were thematically analyzed. Results indicated that the experimental group demonstrated greater fluency and accuracy in grammar, and the learners' reflections reported enhanced confidence and engagement in using the target language across academic and real-life discourse. The outcomes suggest that a balanced integration of explicit and contextual grammar instruction effectively supports the proceduralization of grammar use, aligning with SAT principles.

Keywords: English as a Second Language (ESL), explicit grammar instruction, contextual grammar instruction, Skill Acquisition Theory (SAT), balanced integration

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INTRODUCTION

Grammar is a fundamental aspect of English as a Second Language (ESL) learning, forming the foundation for accuracy and fluency in meaningful communication. As Batstone (1994) notes, “language without grammar would be chaotic” (p. 4) with words lacking the guidelines for how they combine into coherent sentences, resulting in communication descending into disorder. It underscores that grammar instruction plays a vital role in helping learners build correct and meaningful language output. In practice, however, many Sri Lankan ESL learners at the secondary level always struggle to move beyond a rule-based knowledge of grammar toward the spontaneous application of those rules in communication.

Although traditional explicit grammar instruction can effectively build declarative knowledge, allowing learners to recite grammar rules or complete written exercises correctly, in isolation, it often fails to help learners proceduralize this knowledge for fluent use in oral or written communication (DeKeyser, 2015). Through lectures and grammar drills, learners may master grammar tests yet remain hesitant or inaccurate when using those structures in real conversation or composition. Conversely, contextual (implicit) grammar instruction, where learners engage in authentic language tasks without explicit focus on rules, provides abundant, meaningful practice and can improve communication confidence. But such purely immersive approaches may lack the clarity and structure needed for learners to initially grasp complex grammar forms, leading to persistent errors or slow uptake of certain rules. Namely, exclusive focus on communication can leave gaps in grammatical accuracy, while exclusive focus on explicit rule teaching can leave learners with inert knowledge they cannot deploy easily in context. This long-standing explicit vs. implicit instruction debate in Second Language Acquisition (Ellis, 2006; Krashen, 1985) suggests that neither extreme alone is optimal. To bridge this gap, second language (L2) researchers have advocated for integrated approaches that blend explicit instruction with contextual use of language forms, leading to theories like Skill Acquisition Theory (SAT). Originating from cognitive psychology and applied to L2 learning (DeKeyser, 2015), SAT posits that mastering a skill, such as the use of grammar, involves progressing through three stages: declarative, procedural, and automatic. In a SAT environment, language learning is seen as a gradual process of skill development that moves from conscious understanding to automatic use. This progression is deliberately structured through tasks that move from rule explanation to guided practice and



then to communicative use, ensuring that learners gradually internalize language structures and transition from controlled to automatic processing.

In an ESL context, this means a learner might initially learn a grammar rule explicitly (declarative stage), then practice it through exercises or communication (procedural stage), and eventually use it effortlessly in conversation (automatic stage). Crucially, SAT implies that explicit explanation alone is not enough where learners need ample contextualized practice to move beyond the declarative stage, and practice without any explicit foundation may not give learners the initial schematic knowledge they need to practice correctly. Therefore, an integration of both explicit and contextual instruction, guided by SAT, could facilitate the transformation of grammatical knowledge into actual communicative ability. The current study applies this integrated approach to two particularly troublesome English grammar forms for ESL learners: the past simple and present perfect tenses, representing a well-known confusion among L2 learners. The study focuses on Grade 10 students in Sri Lanka, a context where grammar is traditionally taught explicitly and exam-oriented, and it investigates whether combining rule explanation with contextual practice leads to better learning outcomes. Thus, the purpose of the study is to examine the effect of integrating explicit grammar instruction with contextual, meaningful grammar tasks on learners' mastery of the past simple and present perfect tenses and to interpret how it helps learners progress from explanation (knowing grammar rules) to expression (using grammar correctly in communication) using SAT as the conceptual framework. Accordingly, the study is guided by the research question: "Does a balanced integration of explicit instruction and contextual practice, informed by SAT, improve students' grammatical accuracy and fluency more than explicit instruction?" In addressing the research question, the study tests the following hypotheses to determine whether the integration of contextual grammar instruction produces a statistically significant difference in learner performance.

H₁: There is a significant difference between the performance of learners who were exposed to and those who were not exposed to contextual grammar instruction.

H₀: There is no significant difference between the performance of learners who were exposed to and those who were not exposed to contextual grammar instruction.

The research aims to contribute to pedagogical strategies for grammar teaching that produce not just grammar knowledge, but also the ability to confidently use grammatically correct language in real-life situations.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design to investigate the instructional effect. The participants were 40 secondary-level ESL learners from Grade 10 at a Sri Lankan government school, who were selected from two classes since the random assignment across multiple schools was not feasible due



to administrative constraints and limited access to research populations. The sample was assigned to two groups of 20: an experimental group (who received contextual grammar instruction) and a control group (explicit grammar instruction) in terms of “probability sampling”. Both groups had comparable English proficiency and grammar based on a pre-study assessment of the target tenses, which helped establish initial equivalence. The experiment spanned a three-week period in which both groups were taught the past simple and present perfect grammar forms, but with different instructional approaches following the initial instruction. Both groups first received explicit instruction on the target grammar rules. In practical terms, this meant the teacher explained how to form and use the past simple and present perfect, including form, usage differences, and examples in a traditional lesson format that provided every learner with a declarative understanding of grammar. After this common starting point, the two groups diverged in practice activities where the control group practiced the grammar through traditional and repetitive drills with exercises such as sentence completion, verb conjugation, gap-filling worksheets, and other form-focused exercises devoid of real-world context while the experimental group practiced the same grammar through contextualized tasks that situationally embedded the target tenses such as role-plays, maintaining diary entries, storytelling, and information-gap tasks that required learners to choose and use the correct tense to express meaning in both written and oral forms. Data collection instruments included three pre-tests and three post-tests, each consisting of grammar-focused tasks, where the first test targeted the past simple tense, the second test targeted the present perfect tense, and the third test assessed both tenses together. The test items combined sentence completion activities, short written production tasks, and oral elicitation items, enabling assessment of both written accuracy and spoken fluency. This ensured that learners’ performance was not measured solely on paper-based tasks but also reflected their ability to use the target tenses in communicative contexts. The results were analyzed through a paired-sample t-test using SPSS. Qualitative data were gathered from reflective journals that were maintained by the learners during the intervention period, and the content was thematically analyzed to understand learner perceptions of the instructional methods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined whether contextual grammar instruction leads to greater improvement in learners’ grammatical performance than explicit grammar instruction. To address the research question, both descriptive statistics and inferential statistical analyses were employed, followed by qualitative learner reflections to triangulate the findings.

As an initial analytical step, descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to compare the pre-test and post-test performance of the experimental and control groups. The experimental group, which received contextual grammar instruction, demonstrated a consistent increase in mean scores across all three post-tests when



compared to their corresponding pre-tests. Mean values rose from approximately 5.6-6.0 in the pre-tests to 7.0-7.35 in the post-tests, indicating notable improvement. In addition, the median and mode values of the post-tests converged at higher scores, suggesting improved score consistency among learners. Maximum scores also increased from 7-8 in the pre-tests to 9 in all post-tests. Collectively, these descriptive measures suggest a clear upward trend in grammatical performance following contextual instruction. In contrast, the control group, which received explicit grammar instruction, displayed minimal and inconsistent changes between pre-tests and post-tests. While slight fluctuations in mean values were observed, these changes did not reflect a clear pattern of improvement. Median and mode values remained largely unchanged, and maximum scores remained stagnant at 8 across both testing phases. These findings suggest that explicit instruction alone did not result in substantial gains in learners' grammatical performance.

To further determine whether the observed differences were statistically significant, paired samples t-tests were conducted for both groups. Results for the experimental group revealed statistically significant differences between all three pairs of pre-tests and post-tests, with p-values of 0.000 in each case. As these values are well below the conventional alpha level of 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected, confirming that contextual grammar instruction had a significant positive effect on learners' grammatical performance. Conversely, the control group did not exhibit statistically significant differences between pre-test and post-test scores. The p-values for all three test pairs exceeded the 0.05 threshold, leading to acceptance of the null hypothesis. This indicates that explicit grammar instruction did not result in statistically meaningful improvement. Consequently, the alternative hypothesis (H1) was accepted for the experimental group but rejected for the control group, establishing a significant performance difference between learners exposed to contextual grammar instruction and those who were not.

Qualitative learner self-reflections further reinforced the quantitative findings. Learners in the experimental group frequently reported increased confidence, fluency, and ease of grammatical usage. Many highlighted that tasks such as interviews, games, and diary writing enabled them to use grammatical structures naturally and without conscious rule recall. These reflections indicate proceduralization and movement toward automatization, aligning with the third stage of Skill Acquisition Theory (SAT). In contrast, learners in the control group often described reliance on memorization, confusion during oral tasks, and difficulty transferring grammatical knowledge to spoken contexts. These reflections suggest retention of declarative knowledge without procedural mastery.



Overall, the findings strongly support the effectiveness of contextual grammar instruction. The results align with the assertion that form-focused instruction is most effective when embedded in meaningful communication (Norris & Ortega, 2000) as well as the argument for integrating explicit focus on form within communicative contexts. Furthermore, the outcomes corroborate DeKeyser's (2015) claim that fluent language use depends on proceduralized knowledge rather than rule memorization. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative evidence confirms that contextual grammar instruction fosters more durable grammatical development, improved fluency, and greater learner confidence than explicit instruction alone.

CONCLUSIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

This study confirms that, in the current context, integrating explicit instruction with contextual grammar practice enhanced learners' L2 performance related to grammar, in alignment with SAT. Descriptive statistics and t-test analyses revealed substantial gains in the experimental group but not in the control group. Reflective journals further supported these findings, indicating higher learner engagement and confidence when grammar was practiced meaningfully. Thus, the study recommends that ESL teachers should combine rule explanation with contextual grammar tasks to support proceduralization, and calls for curricula reforms to incorporate both deductive teaching and communicative grammar use. However, the limited sample size and the short period of intervention call for caution in the interpretation of results. While the results indicate desired outcomes for greater accuracy and fluency in grammar, further research is encouraged to generalize these findings across larger sample sizes, varied grade levels, and extended timeframes in confirming the wider applicability of the suggested instructional approach.

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