

## The benefits of second language instruction

### What this research was about and why it is important

One of the questions that researchers studying language acquisition sometimes ask is whether the acquisition of a second language is similar to or different from the acquisition of one's first language. For language educators, this question is relevant because, if the two processes are similar or virtually identical, teaching grammatical forms explicitly would not be necessary in second language classrooms. However, if the two processes are different, it would make sense to teach language forms explicitly in second language classrooms. To this extent, the present study investigated whether teaching students English relative clauses resulted in better acquisition of this structure than simply exposing them to relative clauses. Two experimental groups were taught relative clauses, one group in a rule-focused manner and one group in a meaning-focused manner. The third group received exposure to relative clauses but no explicit instruction. The results of this study showed that while all groups improved, the two experimental groups improved more than the group that only received exposure to the target structure. Additionally, the experimental group that received the meaning-focused treatment showed greater benefits overall than the group that received the rule-focused treatment.

### What the researchers did

- 20 students of English at an intensive English language institute in the US participated in the study.
- The students' proficiency was intermediate.
- The target structure were English relative clauses.
- Learners were divided into 3 groups: Two experimental groups were taught English relative clauses and one control group was exposed to English relative clauses, but did not receive instruction.
- The two experimental groups received two different treatments: The first one was rule-oriented and encouraged students to analyze the grammatical structure in detail. The second one was meaning-oriented and allowed students to look at the grammatical structure in context with a focus on its meaning.
- Learners in all three groups completed various written and oral pretests before the treatment, and posttests upon completion of the treatment.

### What the researchers found

- Learners in all three groups improved their command of English relative clauses.
- However, the two experimental groups improved more than the control group.
- Additionally, only the learners who had received the meaning-focused treatment also improved in terms of comprehension of relative clauses.

### Things to consider

- These results suggest that instruction plays an important role in classroom settings. Simply exposing learners to input, as is the case in natural second language acquisition, is less effective than directing learners' attention to grammatical forms, as is typically the case in instructed second language acquisition.
- The results further demonstrate that the type of instruction makes a big difference: Although both meaning-focused and rule-focused types of instruction can be successful, it appears that learning grammatical structures in context with an emphasis on meaning will lead to an overall better and more complete acquisition of the target structure.
- As a whole, the results of this study demonstrate that the process of acquiring a second language is fundamentally different from the process of acquiring a first language.

Materials available on <https://www.iris-database.org/>

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