
**ISLA: How implicit or how explicit should it be?**

**What this study was about and why it is important**

Instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) research has recently attracted more focal attention as researchers seek to differentiate between the naturalistic setting (Second Language Acquisition - SLA) and its instructed counterpart (ISLA). Recent definitions have underscored the context (instructed vs. naturalistic setting), the “mechanisms of learning” (cognitive processes), and the potential manipulation of these processes or the conditions under which such processes take place by instructional intervention. This article went a step further to consider the curricular aspect of the ISLA context that exists within the language curriculum, the type of learning that does take place in an instructed environment and should be promoted in the instructed setting, and the pedagogical implications for the instructed L2 environment, given its curricular status.

**What the researcher did**

- The researcher presented a critical discussion of the context of ISLA that highlighted, amongst other things:
  - its formal or instructed setting,
  - the presence of a naturally occurring language,
  - skills typically promoted,
  - lack of affordances when compared to SLA.
- A succinct overview of cognitive processes reported to play a role in the L2 learning process was presented.
- A concise report of the empirical literature on the effects of type of learning (implicit/incidental vs. explicit/intentional learning) in ISLA with a special focus on the role of awareness or lack thereof in L2 learning was presented.
- One recent study that purported to acknowledge (1) the context (instructed setting), (2) the curricular goal of promoting robust learning in this specific context, and (3) the beneficial role cognitive processes play in the process and product of learning in ISLA, was reported.

**What the researcher found**

- Several major cognitive processes (attention, awareness, activation of prior L1/L2 knowledge, working memory and variables such as levels of awareness and levels or depth of processing) assumed to play important roles during the L2 learning process are subsumed in the major theoretical underpinnings of (I)SLA.
- Explicit/intentional learning seemed to be more effective than implicit/incidental learning.

**Things to consider**

- ISLA researchers who seek to address and contribute to (ideally robust) L2 development in any instructional setting need to seriously consider the context (instructional setting), type of learning (explicit), and curricular issues.
- From a contextual perspective, ISLA researchers must consider (1) the huge disparity between L1 acquisition and L2 learning in regard to amount and type of exposure to and interaction with the L1 or L2 data and (2) the depth of processing associated with type of learning.
- From a type of learning perspective, explicit learning should be promoted in the instructed setting, given that the typical ISLA setting is designed to promote more explicit and intentional learning than implicit and incidental learning and acquisition, which is empirically proven to provide superior learning.
- Consequently, further investigation and promotion of cognitive processes associated with great depths of processing, high levels of awareness (hypothesis testing and rule formulation), and activation of both recently learned and prior knowledge are clearly warranted for all types of L2 linguistic and lexical items at all proficiency levels.
- From a curricular perspective, ISLA research that seeks to inform practice in the instructed setting must be grounded in robust learning outcomes or gain scores that would qualify for minimally a satisfactory academic grade in the instructed setting and not based solely on statistical data such as p values and effect sizes.