

Can L2 inflectional morphology be learned incidentally?

What this research was about and why it is important

Recently, there has been a debate about the nature of the second language (L2) acquisition, specifically, whether it is an implicit (unconscious) or explicit (conscious) process. While prior research supports the fact that L2 grammar can be acquired implicitly, it is still not clear whether all aspects of grammar could be learned this way. Such knowledge, however, would contribute to the theory of Second Language Acquisition and could improve second language teaching. To address this gap, the researchers examined the extent to which students can acquire knowledge of L2 case marking under incidental learning conditions (where students learn without having an intention to learn) and whether the nature of the resulting knowledge would be implicit or explicit. The results showed that students can acquire partial knowledge of the inflectional morphology (grammatically meaningful parts of words, e.g., walk-walked) as a result of the incidental exposure to the language. The nature of this knowledge appeared to be mostly implicit, although low levels of awareness were also found.

What the researchers did

- 42 native speakers of English who had no experience with a language with a morphological system were recruited from a university in the United Kingdom.
- During the first phase of the experiment, learners listened to and repeated sentences that consisted of English phrases with Czech nouns that were inflected according to the word's function in the sentence as a subject or an object. Then, they matched the meaning of the Czech word to one of the two pictures displayed on the monitor. Participants were not informed whether their answers were correct.
- During the second phase, participants listened to the new set of sentences and had to decide whether each sentence belonged to the same system as the sentences from the first part of the study. They also had to say how confident they were in their judgements and mention whether their answers were based on guess, intuition, memory, or rule.
- During the third phase, participants were asked to describe any particular rules or patterns they noticed and indicate at what time of the study this happened.
- Participants were split into two groups: one group completed all phases of the experiment, whereas another group (the control group) took part only in the second and third phases of the study.

What the researchers found

- **L2 inflections can be acquired incidentally, but there are some limits to the degree of this acquisition.**
 - Students who completed all phases of the experiment identified more correct sentences based on inflected objects, while both groups correctly identified almost equal amount of sentences based on inflected subjects.
- **Incidental exposure to the L2 grammar resulted in both explicit and implicit knowledge.**
 - All participants noticed the morphological inflections (explicit knowledge), but no one identified the rules that governed them (implicit knowledge).
 - Although when students indicated greater confidence in their answers, they performed better on the test (explicit knowledge), they also produced a great number of correct answers when their confidence level was low (implicit knowledge).

Things to consider

- The results of this article suggest that it is possible to acquire both implicit and explicit knowledge of the L2 grammar case markers when learning incidentally, however more studies are needed to shed light on the most profitable instructional designs that could facilitate learning of this aspect of grammar.
- “Foreign-ness” of the stimuli might lead to increased attention. Students might have acquired accusative case more because the phoneme used to denote it can be perceived less natural for the native speakers of English, hence they could have noticed it more.
- Students might have not acquired the grammar to the fullest extent because of the short time of the exposure.

Material, data, open access article: Data available from <https://iris-database.org>

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