

## Is meaningful exposure to second language grammar rules sufficient for learning to take place?

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

It is generally accepted that meaningful exposure to a second language, through reading or other exercises, is necessary in order to learn the rules of that language; however, debate exists regarding whether such exposure on its own is *sufficient* for learning to take place. It is commonly believed that exposure to the language should be accompanied by explicit, that is to say direct explanation of grammatical rules as well as detailed feedback when mistakes are made. The present study investigates this question by testing how well participants were able to learn rules related to direct object pronouns in Spanish either with or without being provided with direct explanations of that rule and/or feedback in which it was explained *why* their answer was wrong according to the rule in question. The results suggest that providing explicit information about a rule does not add to what learners gain from interacting with meaningful input, as long as the practice is designed so that it requires learners to actively focus on how the structure contributes to the *meaning*, in this case, deciding who does what to whom.

### What the researchers did

- The researchers used computer-based lessons to teach the rules of Spanish direct object pronouns—while English uses word order to establish who does what to whom as in Subject–Verb–Object (SVO; e.g., She hugged *him*), Spanish relies on morphology and can also structure a sentence as Object–Verb–Subject (e.g. *Him* hugged she).
- They recruited 69 native English-speaking participants from a Spanish language course in an American university. All the participants were given a total of 56 practice items, designed to expose them to the direct object structure in Spanish. These exercises involved matching sentences to pictures or choosing the title for a short article.
- Participants were assigned to one of four groups: **G1** received direct explanation of the rules being learned **before** they began the practice, and explanatory feedback when they made a mistake **during** the practice; **G2** Received direct explanation but no explanatory feedback; **G3** received no explanation but were given explanatory feedback; **G4** received neither explanation nor explanatory feedback. All participants were told if their answers were right or wrong.
- To assess development, the researchers used tests of interpretation (sentence-picture matching) and production (sentence completion and video retelling).

### What the researchers found

- All four groups made progress in their ability to both correctly interpret and produce sentences with direct object pronouns.
- Importantly, statistical analysis did not find any difference in learning among any of the experimental groups; in other words, the presence or absence of direct explanation or explanatory feedback about how to decide who does what to whom in Spanish did not make a difference.
- Thus, the factor common to all the groups—exposure through meaningful practice—was sufficient for learning.
- The researchers thus concluded, on the basis of these results, that learners do **not** need to be provided with explicit information about rules, through either direct explanation or feedback, in order to learn a new grammatical structure, and that explicit information may **not add** to learning when input is enough and practice leads the learner to make form-meaning connections.

### Things to consider

- It should be noted that the finding that learners do not need explicit information about a rule in order to learn it runs contrary to much other evidence on the role of explicit instruction in promoting language development.
- The researchers suggest the reason for this discrepancy may lie in the *amount* and *quality* of exposure that is given to learners. In contrast to many other studies, in this experiment practice was designed so that learners had to *respond* to the sentences presented in order to match it to a picture or to a short text. In this way, the authors argue participants were encouraged to attend to the *meaning* and to make form-meaning connections.
- The researchers thus argue that this type of *active*, meaningful exposure may indeed be sufficient for learning to occur, and that explicit rule presentation does not enhance learning.