



# Analyzed knowledge, metalanguage, and second language proficiency



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## ABSTRACT

The relationship between explicit knowledge and second language (L2) proficiency remains unclear. While some studies have found a strong correlation between both constructs, others have only found a weak, non-significant relationship. These differences are likely due to how explicit knowledge and L2 proficiency have been measured. The present study examines the two components of explicit knowledge, namely, analyzed knowledge and knowledge of metalanguage, and their relationship to different skills and aspects of L2 proficiency. Anglophone learners of Spanish enrolled in an intermediate-level university course completed two tests of explicit knowledge, each measuring analyzed knowledge and metalanguage, respectively, and also several tests of language achievement focusing on different skills. The findings revealed statistically significant differences between analyzed knowledge and knowledge of metalanguage. Moreover, analyzed knowledge significantly correlated with more components of L2 proficiency than knowledge of metalanguage, and correlation coefficients were higher for the former than for the latter. These results point to a larger role of analyzed knowledge in L2 proficiency than of knowledge of metalanguage.

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## 1. Introduction

Knowledge of grammar is an important component of second language (L2) proficiency (Hinkel & Fotos, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2009; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Representations of grammatical knowledge are stored in our brain implicitly or explicitly, and many in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) agree that implicit knowledge of language is at the core of most language use (N.C. Ellis, 2005). However, the usefulness of explicit knowledge in the development and use of the L2 remains an unresolved issue in SLA.

Explicit knowledge of language is defined as the declarative, conscious knowledge of features of the L2 that can be learned and potentially verbalized, and that is accessed mainly via controlled processing (R. Ellis, 2004; Roehr, 2008). Because of its nature, explicit knowledge is less readily available for language use than implicit knowledge. Consequently, the usefulness of explicit grammar instruction in L2 classrooms has often been questioned. The main argument against it is that the contributions of this type of instruction to language development are limited to knowledge that can only be used under very specific circumstances; namely, when there is time available to access it and when the focus is on form (Krashen, 1981; Paradis, 1994). However, this view has been criticized because it mainly focuses on spoken language, and does not take into account the fact that successful performance in written uses of language often requires resorting to explicit

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representations (Hinkel & Fotos, 2002; Johns, 2003; Mitchell, 2000). Other benefits of explicit knowledge have also been pointed out. It may contribute to the establishment of connections between form, function and meaning by, for example, making some features that have low saliency more noticeable (N.C. Ellis, 2011). Explicit knowledge can also be helpful for solving linguistic problems when the learner possesses little or no implicit knowledge about a specific grammar structure (N.C. Ellis, 2005). Furthermore, with sufficient meaningful practice, explicit declarative knowledge may become proceduralized and thus accessed automatically (DeKeyser, 2009). While proceduralized declarative knowledge may not be the same as implicit knowledge at the representational level, both types of representations are arguably equivalent at the performance level (DeKeyser, 2015; Paradis, 2009).

Although communicative language teaching (CLT) enjoys widespread popularity in the L2 teaching profession, many language teachers, particularly in foreign language contexts, strongly believe that explicit knowledge contributes to proficiency in the L2 (Elder & Manwaring, 2004; Mitchell & Hooper, 1991). However, whether there is a relationship between this type of language representation and L2 proficiency is still a debated question in SLA. Such a relationship might be influenced by the component of explicit knowledge (i.e., analyzed knowledge or metalanguage) that is measured and by the skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading or writing) or components (e.g., fluency, vocabulary or grammar) of L2 proficiency that are measured. The study reported here examines how the two components of explicit knowledge regarding several grammatical structures in Spanish are related to measures of proficiency, and further delves into this relationship by examining specific subcomponents of L2 proficiency, particularly in speaking and writing skills.

## 2. Review of the literature

### 2.1. The two components of explicit knowledge

R. Ellis (2004) distinguishes between explicit knowledge as analyzed knowledge and as metalanguage, and stresses the importance of obtaining separate measures of the two when measuring learners' explicit representations. Analyzed knowledge refers to the learners' awareness of grammatical rules and features. Representations of this type of knowledge are available to consciousness, but they may not be available for verbal report (cf. Karmiloff-Smith, 1992; Representational Redescription Model). According to some proponents of a weak interface between implicit and explicit knowledge<sup>1</sup> (e.g., Bialystok, 1994), analyzed knowledge can be derived from implicit knowledge, although it is more often the result of formal instruction that focuses learners' attention on form rather than on meaning. Even though it is possible for learners to access their analyzed knowledge in spontaneous language use, "because this kind of knowledge cannot be accessed easily and rapidly, it is typically only used when there is opportunity for deliberate language planning or monitoring" (Han & Ellis, 1998, p. 6). Analyzed knowledge is typically displayed in linguistic problem-solving, for example in the identification of problematic aspects of L2 production and in error correction.

On the other hand, metalanguage refers to language used to talk about language, which entails the ability to verbalize analyzed knowledge, and to knowledge of technical terminology to refer to language.<sup>2</sup> Knowledge of metalanguage develops mainly through the formal study of grammar rules. Several studies (e.g., Alderson, Clapham, & Steel, 1997; Elder & Manwaring, 2004; Gutiérrez, 2013a; Han & Ellis, 1998) report considerable variation with respect to learners' ability to verbalize rules, which reflects variation in the amount of metalanguage they learn. One important point to consider is the fact that analyzed knowledge exists independently from knowledge of metalanguage, which is not a necessary component of explicit knowledge. In other words, it is possible to be aware of features of the language, but not be able to verbalize such knowledge. The value of knowledge of metalanguage lies in its potential contribution to the development of "explicit knowledge that has greater precision and accuracy" (R. Ellis, 2004, p. 261), and in that it may facilitate access to analyzed knowledge.

Analyzed knowledge is often measured through tests that require learners to judge the grammaticality or acceptability of sentences or texts. Additionally, learners may be asked to identify the part of the sentence that they perceive as problematic in ungrammatical sentences, and to correct the error. Knowledge of metalanguage, on the other hand, can be measured through tests that require learners to identify parts of speech and/or to identify the rules violated in ungrammatical sentences (i.e., receptive knowledge of metalanguage), or alternatively learners may be asked to verbalize those rules (i.e., productive knowledge).

### 2.2. Explicit knowledge and L2 proficiency

This section provides an overview of studies that have examined the relationship between explicit knowledge and L2 proficiency. These studies are summarized in Table 1. Even though explicit knowledge measures have received different names (e.g., grammaticality judgement test, metalinguistic assessment test, or metalinguistic knowledge test), what is relevant for the present study are the actual operations that learners are asked to perform as part of those tests. Therefore, the

<sup>1</sup> See R. Ellis (2005) for a discussion of the different positions regarding this interface.

<sup>2</sup> Language used to talk about language is also referred to as 'metatalk' (Berry, 2010), whereas knowledge of technical terms is also called 'metalingual' knowledge (Han & Ellis, 1998).

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