



Effects of extensive reading and translation activities on grammar knowledge and attitudes for EFL adolescents



Juhee Lee ^{a,*}, Diane L. Schallert ^{b,1}, Eonsil Kim ^{c,2}

^a Department of Foreign Language Education, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, USA

^b Department of Educational Psychology, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, USA

^c Department of English Education, Korea University, Seoul, South Korea

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ABSTRACT

Despite evidence of an association between L2 reading and grammar knowledge by way of research on the role of grammar in reading comprehension, few scholars have investigated the reverse relation, the contribution of reading to grammatical knowledge. In this study, we investigated the effects of two types of reading instruction, *extensive reading* and *translation*, on knowledge of general grammar and specific syntactic features (articles and prepositions) as well as learner attitudes. Participants ($N = 124$) were adolescent EFL learners in South Korea, who received either extensive reading or translation instruction for two academic semesters. From analysis of their responses to linguistic tests and an attitude survey, results suggested that extensive reading and translation activities had differentiated effects on learners' grammar knowledge and attitudes depending on their L2 proficiency. Although both forms of instruction showed positive gains in grammar knowledge from pretest to later tests, extensive reading seemed to have a negative impact on attitude measures for students of low proficiency but produced positive outcomes for high level students on both attitudes and linguistic measures. Alternatively, translation activities seemed beneficial to all level learners for attitudes, whereas the instruction seemed to have more positive effects for mid-proficiency learners on grammar measures.

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1. Introduction

Grammar instruction has been a controversial issue in second language (L2) research and teaching. Although the rise of communicative language teaching led to a downturn of attention to grammar, both by researchers and L2 instructors, recent work has reexamined the important role of grammar in L2 learning and demonstrated that teaching grammar helps learners reach a higher level of language competence (e.g., Ellis, 2002; Norris & Ortega, 2000). Despite this empirical support, it seems unclear how grammar can best be taught. Additionally, Petraki and Hill (2011) found that although many teachers perceive grammar instruction as necessary and effective, they report insufficient knowledge of grammar or inability to explain grammar adequately. It is not surprising that many teachers rely heavily on the explanations and exercises provided in the text materials (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011); thus, some teachers feel tension because of the gap between beliefs that

* Corresponding author. Department of Foreign Language Education, The University of Texas at Austin, 1912 Speedway, Stop D5700, Austin, TX 78712-0379, USA.

E-mail addresses: juheeleecarpdiem@gmail.com (J. Lee), dschallert@austin.utexas.edu (D.L. Schallert), KimEonsil@gmail.com (E. Kim).

¹ Department of Educational Psychology, The University of Texas at Austin, 1 University Station, D5800, Austin, TX 78712, USA. Tel.: +1 512 471 0784.

² Department of English Education, Korea University, 145 Anamro, Sungbukgu, Seoul, South Korea.

grammar should be taught in context and their actual practices that focus on grammar rules taught in isolation (Phipps & Borg, 2009). Perhaps as a consequence, many L2 learners perceive grammar instruction as unsatisfying and boring (Jean & Simard, 2011).

To date, several approaches to grammar instruction have been examined, such as explicit instruction (e.g., Macaro & Masterman, 2006; Tammenga-Helmantel, Arends, & Canrinus, 2014), output-based instruction (e.g., Morgan-Short & Bowden, 2006), feedback (e.g., Sheen, 2007), task-based instruction (e.g., Ellis, 2003), and input-based instruction (e.g., VanPatten, 1996, 2002), but most of these have focused on sentence-level grammar. As an exploratory and experimental study, some scholars have also examined other ways of teaching grammar through listening to target structures with visual stimuli (de Jong, 2005) or through watching subtitled foreign movies containing particular grammatical features (Lommel, Laenen, & d'Ydewalle, 2006). In the present study, expanding on previous research on grammar, we examined reading instruction as an instructional approach for teaching grammar.

In contexts where English is a foreign language (EFL) such as South Korea, explicit grammar instruction with a heavy focus on discrete grammatical features has been a dominant instructional approach (Klapper & Rees, 2003). This traditional approach to teaching grammar may enhance learners' knowledge about grammar rules and terminology even though their ability to apply grammar rules in actual language use may not commensurately increase (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011). In this respect, learning grammar by reading may suggest a new perspective. Indeed, learning grammar by reading is in line with recent approaches to grammar instruction that reject discrete sentence-level grammar teaching and emphasize using numerous examples of a target structure in context to develop knowledge of form–meaning connections (e.g., Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; Nassaji & Fotos, 2004). Celce-Murcia (2002) argued that “all naturalistic learning of first and second languages takes place in context and at the level of discourse rather than the abstract sentence level” (p.119). Reading extended text, which occurs at the level of discourse, provides learners with real or possible contexts in which cultures, minds, and values of a society are embedded, rather than simply decoding words or sentences (Gee, 2001). Furthermore, recent research indicates that grammar knowledge and reading ability are strongly associated in that grammar knowledge is a significant predictor of reading comprehension (Jung, 2009; Zhang, 2012). Whereas these studies focused on the role of grammar in reading comprehension, we were interested in the reciprocal effect, the contribution of reading to grammatical knowledge.

Thus, we examined two reading approaches, extensive reading and translation, focusing on their effects on specific grammatical features and attitudes toward each reading instruction. Extensive reading is characterized as reading a large amount of text at a relatively faster speed with the focus on meaning, not language, and on reading fluency (Day & Bamford, 1998), whereas translation involves reading and translating short texts from the target language into the native language, and aiming for accurate reading. These two positions on L2 reading have developed along different historical paths. Extensive reading has been favored as an innovative reading approach by recent researchers for improving L2 learners' linguistic competence (e.g., Day & Bamford, 2002; Krashen, 2007). The claims are based on the concept that repeated exposure to patterns or structures from reading are cumulatively registered in the implicit learning system and lead to incidental learning of linguistic knowledge (Grabe, 2009). Although other aspects of extensive reading have been investigated, its contribution to grammatical knowledge has received little attention. In contrast, translation has been neglected, even rejected, by L2 researchers and educational leaders due to its close association with the grammar-translation method and the rise of the communicative approach, despite its continued popularity with language teachers around the world (G. Cook, 2010). Yet, most recently, there has been a call for re-examining the role of translation in L2 acquisition (G. Cook, 2010).

Our overarching question, therefore, was the following: Would reading a substantial amount of input (extensive reading) or reading short texts accurately (translation) enhance knowledge of grammar? If so, does such reading help improve general knowledge of grammar as well as of particular syntactic features that are challenging to learn even through formal instruction? To answer these questions was the purpose of the study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Incidental learning

One theoretical rationale for enhancing L2 grammar knowledge through reading comes from studies of incidental learning. The term *incidental learning* represents several meanings. It can refer to a) learning one thing as a by-product while engaging in another activity, b) learning without the intention to learn, or c) engaging in an experimental condition without explicit instruction that a test will follow (Gass, 1999; Hulstijn, 2003). Here, we operationalized incidental learning as learning grammar as a by-product of reading while the learner's attention is focused on language meaning rather than language form.

Many scholars (e.g., Hulstijn, 2005; Krashen, 1989; Reber, 1996) have claimed that a proportion of L2 acquisition occurs *incidentally* (without intention to learn the language but immersed in an environment in which the target language is used) and *implicitly* (without taking language courses or consciously attending to regularities of a language). Although they are not identical, incidental learning is similar to implicit learning in the sense that both are unintentional and uncontrolled (Reber, 1996). The importance of incidental learning comes from its ubiquity in individuals' lives. Marsick and Watkins (2001) argued that informal incidental learning is the main source of adult education because it takes place anywhere and anytime, even when individuals are not conscious of learning. Furthermore, Reber (1989, 1996) and Reber and Allen (2000) argued that implicitly learned knowledge tends to exceed explicitly learned knowledge. Similarly, Krashen (1982, 1989) claimed that incidental natural L2 acquisition surpasses consciously learned language in terms of its utility and the amount ultimately acquired.

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