

# Deductive versus inductive grammar instruction: Investigating possible relationships between gains, preferences and learning styles

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## Abstract

This study experimented the inductive and deductive approaches to grammar instruction with junior high school students in order to uncover their preferences and seek possible relationships between their learning gains, preferences and learning styles. Students were found to have expressed a preference for the deductive approach, but rated both approaches as equally effective. No relationships were discovered between their gains and their preferences or learning styles, which revealed that liking or not an approach had no influence on learning in this case. However, some connections were established between preferences and learning styles: learning styles where conscious learning play a role were generally associated with the liking of grammar instruction irrespective of the fact that it was provided inductively or deductively. Since both approaches were explicit in nature, the discussion explores the idea that explicit teaching may agree better with certain learning styles, and that it would perhaps be wise not to completely discredit implicit teaching on the basis that some studies show a learning advantage for explicit teaching.

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## 1. Introduction

The topic of grammar teaching or focus on form in the field of second language education has been widely discussed in recent decades and the overall conclusion has been, as [DeKeyser \(1998\)](#) stated, that “some kind of focus on form is useful to some extent, for some forms, for some students, at some point in the learning process” (p. 42). However, there is still no firm agreement as to the best way to teach grammar ([Nassaji and Fotos, 2011](#)). In the pursuit of testing the efficacy of different types of pedagogic interventions on grammar, several researchers have focused on whether the best teaching practices should be implicit or explicit. In their meta-analysis of research on the topic, [Norris and Ortega \(2000\)](#) reported that explicit types of instruction tend to prove more effective than implicit types, but

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a number of caveats were mentioned by the authors themselves and others concerning the ways both types of instruction were conceptualized, operationalized and measured (Ellis, 2008b, p. 841; Doughty, 2004; pp. 181–202).

Research into cognitive science in the latter part of the twentieth century has, according to Ellis (2008a), mainly demonstrated that implicit and explicit knowledge of language are “distinct and dissociated, they involve different types of representation, they are substantiated in different parts of the brain, and yet they come into mutual influence in processing” (p. 125). However, nothing so far seems to prove that implicit instruction leads exclusively to implicit knowledge, and explicit instruction to explicit knowledge. Indeed, explicit instruction may very well lead to implicit knowledge. Some researchers have argued on the possibility of a range of effect of explicit instruction going from a ‘weak interface’ (for example Ellis, 2008b) to a ‘strong interface’ (for example DeKeyser, 1995): the weak interface implies that explicit knowledge acquired through explicit instruction can lead to implicit knowledge under certain conditions (for example with students who are developmentally ready and eager to speak more accurately, or with grammar features that are most amenable to teaching), and the strong interface suggests that explicit instruction can lead to implicit knowledge with proper and sufficient practice (the sequence of learning going from declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge to automatization). We now seem to be confronted with the fact that explicit and implicit instruction may both have their place in language teaching, but need to know more about the processes and outcomes of both modes under different conditions and with different types of learners. For this reason, we believe, as Ellis (2008a, p. 125) does, that research in the field should continue to investigate the roles that individual differences play in the results obtained with implicit and explicit learning, and try to determine if interactions exist between specific learner aptitudes or traits and specific educational treatments.

It is from this point of view that the present research was undertaken into the much debated sub-theme of explicit instruction: deduction and induction. Before presenting our research design and results, this article will first define and address the issue of inductive and deductive grammar instruction; it will then discuss the possible contributions of learners’ preferences and learning styles to the efficacy and acceptance of one type of instruction or the other.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Defining deductive and inductive approaches

Both deductive and inductive grammar instruction approaches can be considered explicit teaching when they direct students to attend to a particular language feature with the intent to make students aware of the rule that governs it. Some authors (see, for example, DeKeyser, 1995) would, however, consider that inductive learning could also be associated with an implicit approach when the intent is not to develop an explicit rule, but just to infer the rule without awareness. As for the present study, we will consider inductive and deductive learning within the parameter of an explicit approach and define *explicit instruction* as an inductive treatment, where learners are required to induce rules from examples given to them, or as a deductive treatment, where learners are given a rule which they then practise using” (Ellis, 2008a,b, p. 882). Operationalization of these two types of instruction in research differs very widely (on this topic, see, for example, Decoo, 1996; Erlam, 2003; Vogel et al., 2011). The deductive approach to rule presentation is often associated with the PPP (Presentation-Practice-Production) approach. Depending on how it is operationalized, the form-meaning connection is more or less salient. From numerous examples found in language textbooks and research, one could find diverse variations on the same old theme, so to speak. To summarize, at one end of the continuum, a first option could be to present a language rule, then practice it in drill-type exercises. At the other end of the continuum, a spoken or written text could be presented in which the targeted language feature appears with a certain frequency (input flood) and is highlighted (textual enhancement). The rule is then presented and practiced in different types of exercises and meaning-focused activities, often culminating in a communicative task or open-ended production at the end of the teaching sequence. Halfway in between these two extremes, one could find a sequence in which the rule is presented, then exercised, followed by reading or listening to texts with varying degrees of authenticity in which the targeted pattern is featured.

For the inductive approach, as many different options can be found in the literature. This approach is also often referred to as the discovery or rule search approach. Again, at one end of the spectrum, one can find the illusion of a discovery: students are asked to discover a rule through a few guided questions, and then the teacher (or the book) states it. At the other end of that spectrum, one can find a type of instruction where the learners discover the rules by working with language samples, test their hypotheses with progressively more sophisticated samples, but the rules remain theirs and they are never confronted with the ‘official’ rules as found in grammar books. In between lie many options where

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