Book Review

Implicit and Explicit Knowledge in Second Language Learning, Testing and Teaching

Rod Ellis, Shawn Loewen, Catherine Elder,
Rosemary Erlam, Jenefer Philp and Hayo Reinders.
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The existence of a gap between knowledge and ability is one of the most important issues in second language (L2) teaching and learning. It has been recognized for many years that there is a difference between what language learners know about their L2, and what they can fluently use. For example, an English language learner may know that the third person singular subject requires an "s" at the end of a present tense verb that follows it, but still often produce utterances such as "She play the piano." There have been many attempts to account for this phenomenon within theoretical work in second language acquisition (SLA). Ellis (1985) proposes a variable competence model, while McLaughlin (1990) uses the concept of restructuring to account for the gap between knowledge and ability in language learners. Herschensohn (2000) frames the problem as a performance/competence gap, and Krashen (2003) makes a distinction between acquisition and learning. This article is a review of a recent book that relies on a model of explicit and implicit knowledge to explain the knowledge/ability gap of second

language learners.

Working with five coauthors, Rod Ellis has produced a book which represents progress in the area of SLA. *Implicit and Explicit Knowledge in Second Language Learning, Testing and Teaching* successfully defines and justifies the constructs of implicit and explicit knowledge, offers developed measurement tools, and provides some measure of insight into the relationships among implicit and explicit knowledge, L2 proficiency, and form-focused instruction. In this review I explain in some detail the model of explicit/implicit knowledge that the book puts forward. I also describe the tests which were developed and validated, and briefly discuss the studies included in the book.

The model

The model that Ellis puts forward draws on the work of Nick Ellis and Richard Schmidt to posit the existence of two distinct types of language knowledge—explicit and implicit. Explicit knowledge is conscious, declarative, and verbalizable. A language learner is conscious of his or her explicit knowledge, which consists of a collection of "facts," and the learner can describe this knowledge through the use of language. Implicit knowledge, on the other hand, is tacit and intuitive, procedural, and not verbalizable. A language learner can exploit implicit knowledge to evaluate the grammaticality of a sentence by "feel," but this knowledge does not include any sort of grammar rule that could be expressed in language. Both explicit and implicit knowledge are used in language production, although implicit knowledge is heavily relied upon for activities such as conversation, where time constraints impinge on a language user's ability to reflect on the correctness and appropriateness of the language used.

The model proposed in the book differs in two ways from an earlier model provided by Ellis (1997, pp.107-133). The first difference is that the two types of knowledge are seen as entirely distinct. Explicit

knowledge does not become implicit knowledge, nor does the opposite happen, and although there is a relationship between the two types of knowledge, they are seen as fully dichotomous. This contrasts with the earlier model, in which explicit knowledge "can convert directly into implicit knowledge" (Ellis, 1997, p. 124).

Second, the model reduces the types of knowledge from four to two. In the earlier model, a distinction is made not only between implicit and explicit knowledge, but also between controlled and automatic processes (Ellis, 1997). Controlled processes refer to more "cognitively demanding" processes that are activated through "attentional control" and "use up available processing capacity" (Ellis, 1997, p. 112). Automatic processes, on the other hand, do not require attention, and are acquired through the repetition of a pattern. The earlier model, then, had four types of knowledge--controlled explicit knowledge, automatic explicit knowledge, controlled implicit knowledge, and automatic implicit knowledge. The current theory does away with the four-fold distinction by arguing that implicit knowledge is by nature automatic, and that explicit knowledge is by nature controlled.

The authors have succeeded in putting forward a simpler model, but it differs radically from what many in the field of cognitive psychology argue for. For one thing, there is great debate over whether implicit and explicit knowledge are continuous or dichotomous. According to Dekeyser (2003), "explicitly learned knowledge can become implicit in the sense that learners can lose awareness of its structure over time, and learners can become aware of the structure of implicit knowledge when attempting to access it" (p. 315). It is also an open question whether conflating automatized processes with implicit knowledge and controlled processes with explicit knowledge is the correct theoretical move to make. Dekeyser (2007) argues that "automatized knowledge is not exactly the same as implicit knowledge" (p. 4).

The Tests

There are five tests introduced in the book, three of which are designed as measures of implicit knowledge. The Elicited Oral Imitation Test measures test-takers' grammatical accuracy in repeating statements that have been presented in a meaning-focused context. The Oral Narrative Test measures test-takers' grammatical accuracy as they retell a story after reading it aloud two times. The Timed Grammaticality Judgment Test (TGJT) measures test-takers' ability to judge the grammaticality of sentences under a time constraint.

The Untimed Grammaticality Judgment Test uses the same content as the TGJT, but has no time limits for answers. This was designed as a measure of test-takers' explicit knowledge, as was the Metalinguistic Knowledge Test, which requires test-takers to analyze an ungrammatical sentence and then choose the answer that explains the grammatical mistake most accurately.

As pointed out by Ellis, in order for research based on the implicit/explicit knowledge paradigm to move forward, tools which measure both kinds of knowledge are indispensable. The book includes studies which validate the tests and support the constructs which underlie them. The tests are, however, still a work-in-progress. One problem which must be addressed is the practice effect which was discovered for the Elicited Oral Imitation Test. Also, all of the tests focused solely on grammatical knowledge. In the future, tests which measure other types of language knowledge (pragmatic, phonological/phonetic, etc.) are needed. To be fair in considering the value of the tests, it has been pointed out that there are "no perfect tests" in this area, and all that one can do is to set up a situation where conditions are "conducive to the retrieval of implicit and explicit knowledge, and then infer..." (Dekeyser, 2003, p. 320).

The Studies

Ellis acknowledges the general lack of success of the studies which comprise the third and fourth sections of the book. An instance of this is one of the two studies included in Chapter 7. The study appears to show no relationship or a weak relationship between implicit knowledge and CBT TOEFL and TEOFL iBT scores. This is puzzling, in light of the fact that earlier in the study a panel of experts had rated parts of the TOEFL tests as highly reliant on implicit knowledge.

While many of the studies are less than successful, some do provide food for thought. One study demonstrates that the difficulty of grammatical structures varies according to the type of knowledge examined. For example, the indefinite article is found to be more difficult as implicit knowledge than as explicit knowledge. On the other hand, dative alternation is found to be more difficult as explicit knowledge than as implicit knowledge.

Conclusion

In spite of the lack of success which some of the studies met with, this volume is an important contribution. Its clearly delineated model of implicit/explicit knowledge and the development of tests of explicit/implicit knowledge are a step forward. At the moment, there are many competing theories of SLA (and of implicit/explicit knowledge, for that matter). It is unclear which theories will find favor in the long run, but it is certain that any theory of SLA must account for the knowledge/ability gap demonstrated by L2 learners. This book represents progress in pursuit of that goal.

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