

In: Kuźniak, M.; Rozwadowska, B. (eds.) *PASE Papers 2008*. Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, 359-367.

**Paweł Scheffler,**

*School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań*

**Agnieszka Pietrzykowska,**

*Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań,*

*Arts and Education Department, Kalisz*

## RULE DIFFICULTY AND THE USEFULNESS OF INSTRUCTION: LEARNER PERCEPTIONS AND PERFORMANCE

### 1. Learning through rules vs. learning through tasks

In current second language (L2) acquisition theory, two main approaches to adult L2 instruction can be distinguished. The first, which we will refer to here as rule-based instruction, assumes that second language acquisition can be viewed as the acquisition of a complex skill. This means that in the process of acquisition the target language code should be learnt consciously and systematically: learners become familiar with explicit L2 grammar rules, which they are supposed to proceduralize, automatize and ultimately use in spontaneous communication (e.g. Johnson 1996, 2001; DeKeyser 1998).

In the second major approach to adult L2 instruction, task-based language teaching (TBLT), the goal of instruction is the acquisition of implicit linguistic knowledge, as only this type of knowledge is considered to be the basis of spontaneous speech production. Proponents of TBLT generally claim that implicit L2 knowledge arises out of communicative interaction, which, however, needs to be supported by teachers when learners experience problems encoding or decoding messages while performing a task. In such situations learners' attention should be temporarily shifted from meaning to form.

TBLT is not a uniform instructional paradigm and opinions vary as to the extent to which learners should focus on linguistic form. Let us consider four distinct positions that have been proposed in the literature. First, Long and Robinson (1998: 25) only allow for 'online' pedagogic interventions. That is, if a teacher discovers a "pervasive and systematic error" which is remediable at a given stage of development, he or she is "usually justified in briefly interrupting the group work in order to draw attention to the problem, using pedagogical devices appropriate for students of the age, literacy level, and metalinguistic sophistication concerned." Second, Ellis (2003) argues for the introduction of a secondary code-based module. The module can be implemented with fairly traditional pedagogical means, for example with the presentation-practice-production sequence, and it is supposed to be completely independent of the leading communicative component consisting of unfocused tasks. Third, Nunan (2004) introduces linguistic exercises in the preparation stage for a task. In his view, after being exposed to selected linguistic forms in a communicative context, but before actually performing a task, learners should be given an opportunity to analyze the forms of the system they are learning. Fourth, Willis and Willis (2007: 25) encourage linguistic focus in the post-task phase. In their opinion, "grammar-book exercises" at this stage in the sequence may help "learners to make sense of the language they have experienced."

Regardless of whether one subscribes to a skill view of adult L2 acquisition, or supports one of the versions of the task based approach, one needs to incorporate some form of explicit linguistic focus into one's teaching programme. This being the case, the teacher has to decide which target language rules to prioritize in the process of instruction. One of the factors which bears on the answer is the issue of rule difficulty.

## 2. Easy vs. difficult rules

The question of rule difficulty has caused a great deal of controversy in second language acquisition research. First, it can sometimes be difficult to determine which rules are simple and which are complex. A frequently cited example is the third person singular present tense suffix. On the one hand, adding this suffix to a verb can be classified as a simple operation and one that is easy to learn because it just involves a single morpheme (Krashen 1982). On the other hand, it can be considered difficult as it concerns a communicatively redundant feature, it involves a (long-distance) relationship between a subject and a verb, and its application depends on categories like tense, person and number (e.g. Ellis 1990, Pienemann 1998). Its difficulty (at least in terms of 'acquisition', as opposed to 'learning') is further confirmed by the fact that it is acquired late by both L1 and L2 learners of English.<sup>1</sup>

The second area of controversy concerns selecting rules for explicit instruction: researchers are not unanimous in deciding whether teachers should target easy or difficult rules. For example, according to Green and Hecht (1992), explicit instruction works best with simple rules. Hulstijn and DeGraaf (1994) claim that simple aspects of grammar can be discovered by learners on their own and, therefore, instruction in such areas is unnecessary. Robinson (1996) maintains that when it comes to easy rules, explicit instruction is more useful than implicit teaching and that the effectiveness of the two types of instruction is comparable in the case of complex grammatical phenomena. Scheffler (2008) shows that advanced learners of English feel they benefit the most from explicit instruction in difficult areas of grammar.

DeKeyser (2003), on the basis of research into roles of instruction, hypothesizes a five-degree scale in which levels of rule difficulty are related to the usefulness of explicit instruction. The scale is given in Table 1:

**Table 1:** *Explicit instruction and various levels of rule difficulty (DeKeyser 2003: 332)*

rule difficulty	role of instruction
1. very easy	not useful (not necessary)
2. easy	speeding up explicit learning process
3. moderate	stretching ultimate attainment
4. difficult	enhancing later implicit acquisition by increasing chances of noticing
5. very difficult	not useful (not effective)

<sup>1</sup> See for example Ellis (1994) for a review of morpheme acquisition studies.

### 3. Rule difficulty and the usefulness of instruction: learner perceptions

#### 3.1 University level: Scheffler (2008)

Scheffler (2008) looks at the relationship between rule difficulty and the usefulness of instruction from the point of view of advanced university students of English. He administered a questionnaire to two groups of students: the first group was asked to judge the difficulty of a number of key areas of English grammar. The second group was asked to evaluate the usefulness of instruction in the same areas. The results indicate that with two exceptions, i.e. prepositions and *-ing* forms, university students feel that they benefit the most from instruction in difficult areas. Table 2 below shows the correlation between the judgements of both groups:

**Table 2:** *Assessment results in rank order (Scheffler 2008)*

Group A level of difficulty	Group B usefulness of instruction
1. tenses	1. tenses
2. prepositions	2. modal verbs
3. <i>-ing</i> forms and infinitives	3. conditional sentences
4. modal verbs	4. passive voice
5. conditional sentences	5. reported speech
6. reported speech	6. <i>-ing</i> forms and infinitives
7. passive voice	7. prepositions
8. articles	8. articles
9. nouns	9. nouns
10. pronouns	10. adjectives and adverbs
11. adjectives and adverbs	11. pronouns

#### 3.2 Secondary school level: data collection

The relevance of Scheffler's (2008) results to the average foreign language classroom may be rather limited: the respondents in his survey were advanced students at a college of modern languages. To investigate learner perceptions of rule difficulty and usefulness of instruction at a level that a teacher of English is much more likely to deal with, we administered a more elaborate version of Scheffler's (2008) original questionnaire. The elaboration concerned the exemplification of grammatical categories in the questionnaire: since our respondents were less advanced and less metalinguistically aware than those of Scheffler (2008), we felt they needed to be provided with very clear and explicit examples of the categories in question.

The questionnaire was administered to two groups of upper secondary school Polish learners of English (see Appendix 1 for the English translation of the questionnaire). Each of the groups consisted of 50 pupils, aged between 16 and 18, who were attending English classes at the intermediate level. The questionnaires were administered to groups of about 15 pupils at a time during their regular class meetings. The pupils had an unlimited time to complete them. As in the original study, Group A was asked to assess on a scale of 1 to 5 the difficulty of eleven areas of English grammar.<sup>2</sup> Using the same scale, Group B was asked to assess the usefulness of explicit grammar explanations in the same areas. The results of the study are reported and discussed in the following section.

<sup>2</sup> The scale was supposed to reflect the levels of difficulty distinguished by DeKeyser (2003).

### 3.3 Results and discussion

The results reveal a considerable overlap between the judgements of both groups. As in Scheffler's (2008) study, tenses are considered the most difficult area of English grammar, and also the area in which instruction is the most useful.

**Table 3:** *Assessment results in rank order on the basis of the total score*

GROUP A level of difficulty	total score	average score	GROUP B usefulness of grammar explanations	total score	average score
1. tenses	163	3.3	1. tenses	240	4.8
2. reported speech	149	3.0	2. conditionals	213	4.3
3. passive voice	144	2.9	3. reported speech	213	4.3
4. conditionals	124	2.5	4. passive voice	211	4.2
5. prepositions	113	2.3	5. <i>-ing</i> & infinitive	209	4.2
6. articles	107	2.1	6. prepositions	194	3.9
7. <i>-ing</i> & infinitive	96	1.9	7. adj. & adv.	191	3.8
8. nouns	94	1.9	8. nouns	186	3.7
9. modal verbs	92	1.8	9. modal verbs	185	3.7
10. pronouns	90	1.8	10. pronouns	183	3.7
11. adj. & adv.	73	1.5	11. articles	173	3.5

Further, if one looks at the top four categories in both rankings, one can see that all of them concern verbs and verbal complexes to a greater or smaller extent: the category of tense, as taught in schools, comprises morphological tense and aspect; an important component of reported speech has to do with the rule of backshift; in forming passive sentences it is necessary to build complex combinations of auxiliaries and main verbs; finally, a crucial feature of conditional sentences is the use of tense for fact and non-fact.

The two categories which occupy central positions in both rankings are prepositions and *-ing* forms and infinitives. The learners' judgements in this case may be due to the fact that these categories involve meanings and relations which are literal / transparent, and also those that are idiomatic or highly idiosyncratic. The former are amenable to explanation and being presented as fairly straightforward rules, the latter normally resist such treatment and simply need to be committed to memory. Intermediate learners of English have probably experienced literal meanings more often than idiomatic ones, which may explain the discrepancy between our results for these two categories and those of Scheffler (2008).

The part-of-speech categories associated with the noun phrase, i.e. articles, nouns, pronouns and adjectives occupy positions in the lower part of the ranking, both in terms of the level of difficulty and the usefulness of instruction. The respondents considered articles to be the most difficult area here, and they also see it as the area in which instruction is the least useful. These judgements are not surprising: first, the Polish noun phrase, of course, does not make use of articles, and employs other means (e.g. word order) to make the same distinctions. Second, choosing the right article depends on a number of factors which cannot always be captured by simple rules: as Parrott (2000: 45) says, "[w]e base these choices on a complex interaction of factors including meaning, shared knowledge, context and whether the noun is singular, plural or uncountable." Furthermore, as Parrott (2000: 45) also points out, in many cases articles are used (or not used) in various fixed expressions in ways which appear

to contradict rules that are sometimes formulated. All this clearly makes for a very difficult area to teach.

The correlation between the judgements of the two groups is statistically significant. The Spearman rank order correlation coefficient ( $\rho$ ) for the rankings in Table 3 equals 0.76, which is larger than the critical value of  $\rho$  at the 0.02 level of significance. This means that the value of  $\rho$  we obtained is likely to occur by chance less than twice in a hundred. Table 4 below, which was the input for the statistical test, provides an illustration.

**Table 4:** Rank orders for level of difficulty and usefulness of explanations

	level of difficulty	usefulness of explanations
tenses	1	1
reported speech	2	3
passive voice	3	4
conditionals	4	2
prepositions	5	6
articles	6	11
-ing forms & infinitives	7	5
nouns	8	8
modals	9	9
pronouns	10	10
adjectives & adverbs	11	7

#### 4. Rule difficulty and the usefulness of instruction: learner performance

The data in Tables 3 and 4 reflect the respondents' subjective judgements of difficulty. Subjective perceptions are in our view important and they should be taken into account by teachers when planning grammar teaching. The second part of our study, however, shows that they do not necessarily correspond to how learners can cope with the same areas on a grammar test.

##### 4.1 Data collection

To investigate how learners actually perform on a grammar test we selected four categories from Table 3 and administered a multiple choice test to Group A, i.e. the group we asked to judge the level of difficulty. The four categories were tenses, passive, nouns and adjectives & adverbs. This means that we tested our learners on two verbal categories, a nominal category and one that is related to both nouns and verbs. In this way, we selected two top ranking categories and two from the lower half of the scale. The test consisted of twenty multiple choice items for each category; the subjects, who took in groups of about 15 during their classes, had an unlimited time to complete it. One point was awarded for each correct answer. All the material in the test had been covered by the subjects. A 10-item sample of the test for the category "tenses" can be found in Appendix 2.

##### 4.2 Results and discussion

The maximum score for each component for the entire group was 1000. This means that in general the scores are rather low: in only one category, i.e. adjectives and adverbs, the score exceeded sixty per cent. Adjectives and adverbs were also the category considered the easiest

by the learners. As for the other three, the scores do not match the learners' perceptions of difficulty: the score for the most difficult category, tenses, exceeds that for the passive and nouns.

**Table 5:** *Test results in rank order on the basis of the total score*<sup>3</sup>

area of grammar	total score (in points)	average score
nouns	467	9.3
passive	491	9.8
tenses	553	11.1
adjectives & adverbs	606	12.1

It is nouns that turned out to be the most challenging test component for our learners. This is mainly because the learners had problems recognizing uncountable nouns and selecting the relevant determiners. For example:

We need to buy ..... for our school.

- A. some new equipments    B. some new equipment    C. a few new equipment  
D. a few new equipments

We will have to buy ..... to make this room look nicer.

- A. a new furniture    B. new furnitures    C. some new furniture    D. a little furnitures

The relatively low scores in Table 5 clash with the learners' perceptions of how difficult English grammar is. For example, nouns, with the average assessment of difficulty at the level of 1.9, are considered an easy category. The most difficult category, tenses, is regarded as moderately difficult. The average level of difficulty for all the items in Table 3 is 2.3, just above "easy" in DeKeyser's (2003) scale.

## 5. Conclusion

The studies reported above allow us to make a number of general conclusions. First, it seems that, at least to some extent, the native language of our learners played a part in shaping their perceptions of difficulty. The learners found the English verb phrase to be the most difficult area. The English VP, of course, differs from its Polish counterpart in that it makes use of verbal complexes to signal grammatical categories like aspect. The absence of sequences of auxiliaries in Polish may account for the high score of verbal categories. In the same way, the L1 – L2 contrast may explain the prominent position of articles in the noun phrase.

The second general observation we would like to make is that while the learners found English grammar easy, they also considered grammar instruction useful: the average usefulness score for all the categories in Table 3 is 4.0. Similar results were obtained by Scheffler (2008), which means that a general tendency for Polish learners seems to have emerged. It would be interesting to see whether learners of English from other L1 backgrounds share these perceptions of difficulty and the usefulness of instruction.

The results we obtained in the test of explicit knowledge are certainly very tentative: a 20-item multiple choice test is a rather crude measure of explicit knowledge of any grammatical category. Nevertheless, in general terms, one can say that the results of the test

<sup>3</sup> We calculated a split-half reliability estimate for each component of test. The reliability coefficients were as follows: passive: 0.81, adjectives & adverbs 0.71, tenses: 0.68, nouns 0.68.

indicate that a category considered easy by learners may prove difficult to deal with on a test. The reverse also applies: a category perceived as difficult may pose less serious problems than expected.

To some extent, the discrepancies mentioned above may be due to the fact that general perceptions of difficulty translate into the effort made by learners to master a given category. If learners' perceptions of difficulty are shared by teachers, then, the English tense system is likely to receive special attention in the process of instruction. Teachers' judgements of grammar difficulty and the usefulness of instruction are, in our opinion, areas definitely worth investigating.

The study reported in the present paper can be placed in the wider context of learner expectations and perceptions of the teaching process. As Thornbury (1999: 17) says, many learners in general expect grammar instruction to make "the learning experience more efficient and systematic". We have shown that there are specific areas of grammar in which (at least Polish) learners of English find instruction useful. To us this means that grammar instruction in these areas should be prioritized. If teachers ignore such perceptions and expectations, as Thornbury also (1999: 17) warns, they risk frustrating and alienating many of their learners.

## Appendix 1

Group A: On a scale of 1 to 5 assess the difficulty of the following areas of English grammar.  
Group B: On a scale of 1 to 5 assess the usefulness of grammar explanations in relation to the following areas of English grammar.

level of difficulty	usefulness of explanations
1 very easy	1 not useful at all
2 easy	2 of little usefulness
3 moderate	3 moderately useful
4 difficult	4 useful
5 very difficult	5 very useful

  

area of grammar	level of difficulty (A) usefulness of grammar explanations (B)
modal verbs (e.g. <i>may, might, can, could</i> ) <i>You can borrow my car.</i> <i>He could have escaped through the window.</i>	
pronouns (e.g. <i>none, all, someone, everyone</i> ) <i>None of my friends believe me.</i> <i>Everyone is ready.</i>	
prepositions (e.g. <i>after, on, into, with</i> ) <i>I look after my sister.</i> <i>I put the book on the table.</i>	
tenses <i>More and more people are becoming vegetarians.</i> <i>I have been living in Poznań for ten years.</i>	
passive voice <i>He has been arrested.</i> <i>They will be punished.</i>	
conditional sentences	

<i>If you need money, I can lend you some.</i> <i>If I was rich I would buy a house in California.</i>	
nouns (e.g. countable, uncountable) <i>We need some new furniture.</i> <i>The police are looking for my brother.</i>	
articles ( <i>a, an, the</i> ) <i>She is a very good teacher.</i> <i>We go to school in the village.</i>	
reported speech <i>He said he would help me.</i> <i>I asked why he had come to Poznań.</i>	
adjectives and adverbs (e.g. comparison) <i>My sister is taller than me.</i> <i>She is the most beautiful girl in the world.</i>	
-ing forms and infinitives <i>I enjoy reading books.</i> <i>I want to study English.</i>	

#### Appendix 2: Multiple choice test sample - tenses

- The weather ..... worse and worse. We should turn back.  
A. getting                      B. get                              C. gets                              D. is getting
- Steve is a photographer. He ..... pictures for a sports magazine.  
A. is taking                      B. take                              C. taking                              D. takes
- She .....weight since I last saw her.  
A. has lost                      B. lost                              C. was losing                      D. had lost
- Tommy is wet. He .....in the rain.  
A. was walking                      B. has been walking                      C. had been walking                      D. walks
- The Browns .....here two years ago.  
A. were moving                      B. have moved                      C. had moved                      D. moved
- He was waiting for the bus when the accident ..... .  
A. was happening                      B. happened                      C. has happened                      D. was happen
- Susan ..... two novels by the time she was twenty.  
A. had written                      B. was writing                      C. wrote                              D. has written
- Is that the phone? -Yes, but don't get up. I .....it.  
A. am going to answer                      B. answer                              C. will answer                      D. am answering
- What time ..... yesterday?  
A. did you arrived                      B. arrived you                      C. you arrived                      D. did you arrive
- John..... in the library right now. He is in his room.  
A. doesn't study                      B. isn't study                      C. isn't studying                      D. doesn't studying

#### References

- DeKeyser, R. M. (1998). Beyond focus on form: Cognitive perspectives on learning and practising second language grammar. In Doughty C. J. and J. Williams (eds.), *Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- DeKeyser, R. M. (2003). Implicit and Explicit Learning. In Doughty C. J. and M.H. Long (eds.), *The Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford, UK/Malden, MA, Blackwell.



- Ellis, R. (1990). *Instructed Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford, UK/Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Green, P. and K. Hecht (1992). Implicit and explicit grammar: An empirical study. *Applied Linguistics* 13/2, 168-84.
- Hulstijn, J. and R. de Graaff (1994). Under what conditions does explicit knowledge of a second language facilitate the acquisition of implicit knowledge. A research proposal. In Hulstijn, J. and R. Schmidt (eds.), *Consciousness in Second Language Learning*. AILA Review 11.
- Johnson, K.(1996). *Language Teaching & Skill Learning*. Oxford, UK/Cambridge MA: Blackwell.
- Johnson, K. (2001). *An Introduction to Foreign Language Learning and Teaching*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Long, M.H. and P. Robinson (1998). Focus on form. Theory, research and practice. In C. J. Doughty and J. Williams (eds.), *Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. (2004). *Task-based language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Robinson, P. (1996). Learning simple and complex second language rules under implicit, incidental, rule-search, and instructed conditions. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 18, 27-67.
- Parrott, M. (2000). *Grammar for English Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pienemann, M. (1998). *Language Processing and Second Language Development: Processability Theory*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Scheffler, P. (2009). Rule difficulty and the usefulness of instruction. *ELT Journal* 63(1): 5-12. First published online 2008, doi: 10.1093/elt/ccn014.
- Thornbury, S. (1999). *How to teach grammar*. Harlow: Longman.
- Willis, D. and J. Willis (2007). *Doing Task-based Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.