This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Language Awareness* on 27 Sep 2011, available online:
http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09658416.2011.570349
Language Awareness 2011 20(3): 221-237

Rule difficulty: teachers' intuitions and learners' performance

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The need for some form of explicit grammar instruction is recognized in most current approaches to second language teaching. Since the usefulness of explicit instruction is at least to some extent dependent on the difficulty of the rules that are taught, an important question for teachers is whether their judgements of rule difficulty are reliable. This study investigates the question of whether there is a significant relationship between teachers' assessment of rule difficulty and learners' ability to produce controlled output based on explicit rules. In the study, 25 Polish teachers of English were asked to evaluate the difficulty of 12 pedagogical rules of English grammar. After that, 50 Polish learners of English were asked to produce example sentences based on the same rules. To test the null hypothesis of no significant relationship a Spearman rank order correlation coefficient was calculated ($r_s = -0.9$). The results were found to be significant ($p < 0.01$ for a two-tailed test). They are discussed in terms of what they mean for the process of selecting rules for explicit instruction.

Keywords: explicit grammar; rule difficulty; teachers' intuitions

Explicit grammar teaching in L2 instruction

Children are very successful implicit language learners: they invariably acquire their native language through communication and without the help of any explicit instruction. By contrast, adult learners' ability to acquire language purely implicitly is in many respects limited: as N. Ellis (2007, p. 20) points out, 'empirical analyses of learners in 'grammar-free' communicative, natural, or immersion L2 and FL programmes demonstrated significant shortcomings in the accuracy of their language.' To remedy these shortcomings various forms of explicit instruction have been proposed.

The relationship between implicit and explicit knowledge in L2 acquisition has been the subject of extensive discussion in the literature (e.g. DeKeyser, 1998; N. Ellis, 2005; R. Ellis, 2005; Hulstijn, 2002, 2005; Krashen, 1982; Sharwood Smith, 1981; Paradis, 2009) Sorace, 1985 - to name just a few). The dominant view at present is that explicit knowledge can indirectly promote the development of implicit knowledge. In general, it has been

proposed that explicit instruction can support L2 learners in the following ways: (a) through helping them to notice formal L2 features; (b) through helping them to notice gaps between their output and the features of input; (c) through enabling them to proceduralize and automatize L2 rules; (d) through providing data for the implicit system.

The precise way in which explicit instruction is to be incorporated into teaching programmes largely depends on which of the roles just mentioned one subscribes to. For those who adopt the weak interface position, i.e. who consider noticing and noticing the gap as the main component processes of the interface, L2 instruction should primarily be based on structurally unfocused tasks which induce interaction between learners, with explicit grammar teaching playing a secondary role (e.g. R. Ellis, 2003; Long and Robinson, 1998). In this view, explicit L2 knowledge can only contribute to planned language use. For those who opt for a strong interface and maintain that explicit rules can be proceduralized, automatized and ultimately used in spontaneous communication, explicit teaching of rules will be a central element of the instruction process (e.g. DeKeyser, 1998). Finally, even in a non-interface view like that of Hulstijn (2002), there is room for explicit grammar rules: controlled output generated with the help of such rules is registered by the independent implicit system.

The provision of explicit rules is, then, a means of instruction assumed in a number of current approaches to L2 teaching. There is also empirical evidence indicating that explicit instruction is effective. Norris and Ortega (2000), in an often quoted statistical meta-analysis of the relevant research published between 1980 and 1998, reach the following conclusions: (a) when compared with simple exposure, L2 instruction is effective and makes a substantial difference; (b) explicit types of instruction are more effective than implicit ones; (c) treatments that integrate form and meaning (focus on form) are equally effective as treatments that focus on forms.

Pedagogical grammar rules

There have been numerous discussions of the concept of 'rule' in the SLA and language teaching literature, for example, Dietz (2002), R. Ellis (2006), de Graaff (1997), Housen, Pierrard, & Van Daele, (2005), Hulstijn and de Graaff (1994), Thornbury (1999), Westney (1994). Dietz (2002: 266) discusses four basic senses of the term 'rule':

(1) Rule as a regularity that is inherent in language and/or language use
(2) Rule as a concrete formulation of such a regularity
(3) Rule as a psychological entity
(4) Rule as a structure indicating surface regularity

As far as the second sense is concerned, Dietz (2002) distinguishes between L1 rules and interrules (i.e. L2 rules). They can be linguists' rules, native speakers' formulations or descriptions in second / foreign language textbooks. The focus of the present paper is on the last type, that is, 'pedagogic interrules', which can be defined as instructions for L2 learners on how to produce the target language correctly. The instructions that L2 learners receive concern two domains: form and use. Consequently, two types of production rules are distinguished: rules of formation / form and rules of use (e.g. Thornbury, 1999; Westney, 1994;). Thornbury (1999, p. 12) provides the following examples of rules of form and use with respect to the English past tense:

> To form the past simple of regular verbs, add *–ed* to the infinitive.
> The simple past tense is used to indicate past actions or states.

Selecting rules for explicit instruction

Assuming that both the theoretical and empirical arguments for explicit grammar instruction are correct, an important question that remains is which pedagogical rules to select or prioritize in the process of teaching. The discussion in this context has centred around the issue of rule difficulty (e.g. Bialystok, 1979; DeKeyser, 1998, 2003, 2005; Dietz, 2002; R.

Ellis, 2002, 2006; de Graaff, 1997; Green and Hecht, 1992; Housen et al. 2005; Hulstijn, 1995; Hulstijn and de Graaff, 1994; Krashen, 1982; Pica, 1985; Robinson, 1996; Roehr and Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2009). DeKeyser (2003, p. 332), on the basis of his interpretation of research into implicit and explicit learning, hypothesizes the following relations between rule difficulty and explicit instruction:

Table 1 Usefulness of explicit instruction and levels of rule difficulty (DeKeyser 2003: 332)

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

In order to assess the difficulty of grammatical rules, researchers have tried to develop objective criteria which could be used to determine what makes L2 grammar difficult. DeKeyser (2005) discusses three factors which in his view determine grammatical difficulty: complexity of meaning, complexity of form, and complexity of the relationship between form and meaning. If an L2 feature designates a novel and / or abstract meaning for a learner, and if expressing that meaning involves a large number of morphemes that need to be selected, then the feature will be difficult. The learning difficulty will be increased further if the link between form and meaning is not transparent. This is a particularly acute problem for naturalistic learners who are not provided with explicit rules describing form-meaning relationships.

R. Ellis (2006) proposes two sets of criteria: those responsible for learning difficulty as implicit knowledge (e.g. frequency, saliency and regularity), and those that determine difficulty as explicit knowledge. The latter set includes two main categories: conceptual clarity and metalanguage. As far as conceptual clarity is concerned, R. Ellis (2006, p. 438) adopts de Graaff's (1997, p. 41) definition, which describes it as "the number of different formal or functional grammatical features that contribute to the specific form of a target structure and the specific function it performs." So, for example, in R. Ellis's view (2006, p. 438), English *wh*- questions, are difficult to learn as explicit knowledge because of their formal complexity, and the English article system is difficult because of its functional complexity. As for metalanguage, the more of it is necessary to formulate a rule, the more difficult the rule is. And whereas in some contexts there is a choice as to the amount of technical language that needs to be included in a rule, in others, like the dative alternation in English, certain metalinguistic terms simply cannot be avoided (R. Ellis, 2006, p. 439).

Two very specific proposals for determining the complexity of rules of form are Dietz (2002) and Housen et al. (2005). In Dietz's (2002) framework, rule complexity is governed by three factors: the number of criteria in a rule, the number of subconditions in the conditional part of a rule and the number of subrules which a given domain requires. Thus, the domain of the German 'Perfekt' involves two subrules: one concerning the auxiliary 'haben' and one concerning the auxiliary 'sein'. Within each subrule, there are a number of subconditions specifying the types of main verbs with which each auxiliary should be used: for example, the learners needs to know that 'haben' is used with transitive and reflexive verbs, and 'sein' with 'all verbs of movement referring to change of position' (p.275). This means that in order to form the 'Perfekt' construction appropriately, the learner needs to consider semantic as well as morphosyntactic information. Finally, there are also numerous criteria in the rule referring to linguistic classificatory terms (e.g. 'transitive verbs', 'reflexive verbs').

Housen et al. (2005) distinguish between structure complexity and rule complexity. As for the former, they admit (p. 242-43) that there is no 'generally accepted metric for distinguishing between simple and complex linguistic structures', and adopt in their study Givón's (1991, 1995) model of functional markedness. In the model (Givon 1995, p. 28), three criteria are used to determine the functional markedness of a structure: structural complexity ('The marked structure tends to be more complex (or larger) than the corresponding unmarked one'), frequency distribution, and cognitive complexity ('The marked category tends to be cognitively more complex – in terms of mental effort, attention demands or processing time – than the unmarked one').

As for rule complexity, Housen et al. (2005, p. 241) define it 'in terms of the *degree of elaboration* with which a rule is formulated, i.e. as the number of steps the learner has to follow to arrive at the production of the intended linguistic structure, and the number of options and alternatives available at each step.' The following examples (p. 241) demonstrate that the same structure (the French present conditional) can be described either by a complex or a simple rule:

> Complex rule:
> 1. determine the verb class to which the verb belongs;
> 2. if the verb belongs to the –er/-ir class, then select the infinitive *être* and the endings of the *imparfait* (*-ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient*);
> 3. if the verb belongs to the –re class: select the infinitive + the endings of the *imparfait*;
> 4. if the verb belongs to neither of the categories above, select the stem of the *futur simple* and add the endings of the *imparfait.*
>
> Simple rule:
> 1. take the stem of the *future simple* form of the verb;
> 2. add the endings of the *imparfait* in the corresponding person and number (*-ais, -ais, -ait, -ions, -iez, -aient*).

Dietz (2002, p. 282) also suggests that in pedagogical accounts of L2 grammar, rule complexity can be reduced by employing more abstract criteria or terms, and by omitting those subconditions and subrules that are of 'low reliability and/or restricted scope'. However,

the question remains whether using more abstract terms actually makes rules easier to process for learners. Further, while it may be possible to employ the criteria developed by Dietz (2002) or Housen et al. (2005) to objectively evaluate linguistic structures and pedagogical rules of form in terms of their complexity, in the case of semantic / pragmatic descriptions included in rules of use, no comparable criteria seem to be available. It seems, then, that to assess the difficulty of rules of use one has to turn to the judgements of expert informants, i.e. foreign language teachers.

Teachers' judgements have been used in SLA research to assess rule difficulty. That was the approach used by Robinson (1996), who lists among its advantages its high face validity, replicability and the fact that it provided empirical support for the distinction between easy and difficult rules (p. 33). According to R. Ellis (2006, p. 439), such an empirical means may be necessary for assessing the difficulty of different declarative rules because objective linguistic criteria are more like 'general guidelines' and 'it may prove impossible to arrive at criteria that will ensure a reliable and valid assessment'. The present study examines teachers' intuitions with respect to rules of use containing semantic / pragmatic descriptions.

The study

Aim and hypothesis

The aim of this study is to determine whether teachers can predict how well learners of English as a foreign language can perform with respect to both form and use in the task of producing sample sentences. In accordance with this aim, the null hypothesis that there is no significant correlation between teachers' judgements and learners' performance will be tested.

Participants

There were two groups of subjects in the study: a group of 25 Polish teachers of English and a group of 50 Polish learners of English. As for the former group, eight male and 17 female

teachers participated, aged between 25 and 54. They were either secondary school teachers at the time of the study or teachers with experience of teaching secondary school students. Their average teaching experience was 12.5 years (the minimum teaching experience was 5 years and the maximum was 30). They were randomly selected for the study from a list of secondary schools in the author's province.

The learners were secondary school students, aged 17 to 18. There were 23 males and 27 females in the group. They had been learning English for 8.8 years on average, almost exclusively in a foreign (rather than second) language context: they had spent an average of 0.5 week in English speaking countries (six weeks at the most). At the time of the study, all the learners were attending English instruction in their school at the upper intermediate level. Both the secondary school and the learners in the school were randomly picked for the study from among 20 schools in the author's geographical proximity. The learners had been given no prior information concerning the nature of the task they would be asked to perform.

Materials

Both the learners' test and the teachers' questionnaire contained the same rules of use in the same order. All the rules came from the following textbooks published by Pearson Longman ELT: *Matura success intermediate* by Hastings, McKinlay and Cichmińska, and *Matura success upper intermediate* by ComynsCarr, Parsons and Szmerdt-Chandler. At the time of the study the learners were using the latter; the former had been covered in the previous school year.

The *Matura success* series consists of six course books ranging from the beginner level to the advanced level. It is a recently published general English course aimed at secondary school students, aged between 14 and 20. The reasoning for content organization is explained in the following manner by the authors:

> In keeping with current trends in language teaching, we provide very solid skills training but at the same time, we are aware that skills cannot be practised without a solid base in grammar. They have therefore been given equal emphasis. (Fricker, 2007, p. 5)

A teaching unit typically contains a reading and a vocabulary section, speaking, listening and writing activities, and a grammar section. The grammar sections are inductive with concise rules provided at some point. Up to three grammar features are presented in a single teaching unit and each of the features is always introduced in context. Learners' analysis of examples is followed by practice in which the degree of control is gradually relaxed.

English grammar in *Matura success* is, then, covered explicitly and systematically: as the authors admit (Fricker 2007, p. 5), '*Success* provides a structured and thorough grammar syllabus'. In more general terms, it seems that the type of instruction that *Matura success* offers and that the learners actually received can be described as the weak version of communicative language teaching: it 'stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes and, characteristically, attempts to integrate such activities into a wider program of language teaching' (Howatt 1984, p. 279).

Both the test and the questionnaire consisted of 12 rules altogether: ten were taken from *Matura Success Intermediate* and two (the Future Perfect and the Future Continuous rule) from *Matura Success Upper Intermediate*. They had all been covered by the learners participating in the study. The learners received their English instruction in the school in groups of between 10 and 15: two groups were taught by a female teacher and two by a male, each with eight years' teaching experience. The teachers closely followed the course book and

used the same types of procedures to cover the material. Both of them also completed the teachers' questionnaire.

The rules, grouped here on the basis of grammatical categories, are given below. On the actual test and in the questionnaire, they were in a random order.

Simple tenses

1. We use the Present Simple to talk about habits and routines.
2. We use the Past Simple to describe finished actions.

Continuous / progressive aspect

1. We use the Present Continuous to talk about actions happening now.
2. We use the Past Continuous to describe things which were in progress at a specific time in the past.
3. We use the Future Continuous for actions that will be in progress at a specific time in the future.

Perfect aspect

1. We use the Present Perfect Simple to talk about a finished action if we don't say exactly when it happened.
2. We use the Past Perfect to talk about an action that happened before another action in the past.
3. We use the Future Perfect for actions that will be completed before a specific time in the future.

Perfect + Continuous

1. We use the Present Perfect Continuous to talk about an action that started in the past but is still continuing.

Conditionals

1. We use First Conditional to talk about situations that have a chance of happening in the future.
2. We use Second Conditional to talk about situations which are impossible now or in the future.
3. We use the Third Conditional to talk about a situation that had a chance of happening in the past but it didn't happen.

In the case of many of the grammatical categories in the rules above, *Matura success intermediate* does not provide pedagogical rules of form. The forms referred to by the metalinguistic labels that are included in the rules are supposed to be identified by learners during instruction in the sections of the course book that precede the rules. The forms are also made prominent through bold type in the examples that accompany the rules. Such an approach is possible because most of the forms (and some of the uses) that learners deal with

in *Matura success intermediate* were introduced at lower levels of instruction. There was no way of verifying what rules of form the learners had actually been exposed to in the course of their learning.

The choice of verbal categories for the study was motivated by two main factors. First, the content of the grammar syllabus of *Matura success intermediate* is dominated by the grammar of the verb phrase: most of the grammar points that are discussed concern the VP, that is, tense, aspect and conditional sentences. Second, as DeKeyser (2005, p. 5) says in his review article, verbal aspect is one of the categories which are 'notoriously hard to acquire for native speakers of L1s that do not have them or that use a very different system.' This element of grammar, according to DeKeyser, is also 'strongly resistant to instructional treatments.' The subjects in the present study meet the L1 criterion: the Polish VP lacks verbal complexes consisting of auxiliaries and main verbs encoding the perfect and continuous / progressive aspects: aspectual distinctions in Polish are handled by lexical rather than grammatical means. Unreal conditions in the past are also formed by different means in Polish and English. In view of the above considerations, it seemed interesting to examine how the learners would be able to cope with rules concerning these phenomena.

Learners' ability to employ explicit grammar knowledge is normally examined with the help of tests like untimed grammaticality judgements or error correction (e.g. R. Ellis, 2005). In this study, the learners were asked to produce written untimed output based on selected explicit rules. Such a design was dictated by three factors. First, it seemed that the teachers would find it easier to assess rule difficulty in relation to a task which involved producing language rather than judging grammaticality or correcting errors. Second, a language production task seemed closer than a grammaticality judgement task to communicative applications of explicit rules, i.e. to using such rules in planned

communication. Third, designing the study in this way made it easy to link samples of the learners' linguistic behaviour to specific rules.

Procedure and analysis

The teachers were either sent the questionnaires via e-mail or were approached in person. Out of the 25 teachers who were sent the questionnaires, 20 responded. All the teachers approached in person completed the questionnaire. In the instructions, the teachers were asked to rate the difficulty that the rules might pose to Polish secondary school learners of English at the upper intermediate level in the task of writing example sentences. They were also asked to use a one to five scale (i.e. 1 for 'very easy', 2 for 'easy', etc.), which was supposed to correspond to DeKeyser's (2003) scale of rule difficulty given in Table 1. The rules were supposed to be evaluated by the teachers with respect to problems of both form and meaning that the learners might experience.

The learners were administered the test in groups of between 10 and 15 during their regular class times. They received instructions in Polish to illustrate in writing as accurately as possible (i.e. referring to both form and use / context) each of the rules on the test with one sentence in English, as if they were giving an example to a class mate who did not know how the rule worked. The time they were given to complete the task was unlimited.

The sentences produced by the learners were evaluated independently by two expert native speaker teachers of English. Interrater agreement was 93 per cent. The cases in which there was disagreement were decided by the researcher. Each sentence was worth one point, which was awarded when the sentence contained correct verb forms accurately illustrating the use of a given structure described in the rule. Any other errors were ignored. For example, sentence (1) below, which illustrates the Past Continuous rule, was awarded one point:

(1) *I was cooking when ten o'clock news started.*

The score for sentence (2) was 0.5 point: the form is correct, but the sentence does not illustrate accurately the use of the Past Continuous described in the rule, i.e. there is no reference to a specific time in the past.

(2) *I was reading this book.*

Finally, no points were awarded for sentences in which the verb forms were incorrect. This was motivated by the need to avoid arbitrary decisions concerning the subjects' understanding of particular rules: with incorrect verb forms, it was difficult to reliably distinguish cases in which the learners understood the semantics of a given structure but used an incorrect form to express it, from those in which the learners had problems with both form and meaning. Consequently, sentences like (3), (4), (5) and (6), which were supposed to be illustrations of Present Perfect Simple, Future Perfect, Past Simple and Present Simple respectively, all earned zero points.

(3) *I had ate my sandwich.*
(4) *I will have cook before you came.*
(5) *I done my homework.*
(6) *She always come home at 2 pm.*

The evaluation procedure was followed by the calculation of the descriptive statistics for the learners' test and the teachers' questionnaire. The total scores for the grammatical categories in each were arranged in a rank order. To determine the degree of similarity between the two ranks, the Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient was calculated.

Results

Table 2 shows the mean, minimum and maximum scores and the standard deviation for the learners' test.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for the learners' test

mean	**8.5 pts**
maximum score	**12 pts**
minimum score	**3 pts**
standard deviation	**2.1 pts**

Overall, the learners scored 429.5 points out of the total 600. That is, the overall success rate was 71.6 per cent. Table 3 presents the success rates for each of the twelve rules ranked from the lowest to the highest score.

Table 3 Success rates for the twelve rules in rank order

grammatical category	**total score (out of 50 pts)**	**%**
third conditional	**17**	**34**
future perfect	**24.5**	**49**
second conditional	**29.5**	**59**
past perfect	**33.5**	**67**
future continuous	**35**	**70**
present perfect	**35**	**70**
present perfect continuous	**37.5**	**75**
first conditional	**38**	**76**
past continuous	**38**	**76**
past simple	**47**	**94**
present continuous	**47**	**94**
present simple	**47.5**	**95**

The descriptive statistics in Table 4 show how the teachers evaluated the difficulty of all the grammatical areas in question.

Table 4 Descriptive statistics for the teachers' questionnaire

mean	**28.4 pts**
maximum score	**40 pts**
minimum score	**17 pts**
standard deviation	**0.8 pts**

Table 5 shows the results of the teachers' assessment in rank order on the basis of the total score.

Table 5 Results of the teachers' questionnaire

grammatical category	**total score (out of 125 pts)**	**average**
present simple	**26**	**1.04**
present continuous	**27**	**1.08**
past simple	**35**	**1.4**
past continuous	**49**	**1.96**
first conditional	**51**	**2.04**
future continuous	**61**	**2.44**
present perfect	**63**	**2.52**
second conditional	**64**	**2.56**
past perfect	**66**	**2.64**
present perfect continuous	**78**	**3.12**
third conditional	**89**	**3.56**
future perfect	**101**	**4.04**

Discussion

To test the hypothesis under investigation, a Spearman test on the rank-ordered learners' and teachers' data was performed ($r_s = -0.9$). Because the p-value is less than 0.01 (for a two-tailed-test) the null hypothesis can be rejected. This means that there is a significant correlation between the variables, such that the more difficult a particular grammatical category is predicted to be by the teachers, the lower the score on the learners' test.

The results demonstrate that teachers' judgements of rule difficulty correspond very closely to learners' ability to use rules to produce output: the correlation is highly significant. Still, the question remains what actually caused some rules to be easy for learners and others to be difficult. Let us turn to the specific rules that the learners had to deal with to see what problems of form and meaning the learners experienced.

- Simple tenses

The two simple tenses were the least formally complex verbal structures on the test: in each case the choice involved only one verb. The vast majority of the learners were able to handle the forms very well: there were very few incorrect choices. The meanings of the two tenses did not pose any significant problems either: no Past Simple sentences were questioned by the native markers because they did not meet the description in the rule and only one Present Simple sentence was questioned for this reason (i.e. it did not refer to a habit or a routine):

(7) *She works in Warsaw.*

Typical examples given to illustrate the rules were as follows:

(8) *I go to school every day.*

(9) *I finished this project yesterday.*

- Continuous aspect

The problems that the Present Continuous construction posed were related to the choice of the correct verb forms. However, in no sentences did the learners omit the auxiliary. In general, the learners found it easy to illustrate the meaning of this category.

(10) *He is writtenig now.*

(11) *I can't answer the phone, I'm having a shower now!*

Many more problems were experienced by the subjects when giving examples of the Past and Future Continuous. As for the former, the main source of difficulty was the provision of an accurate time reference: the references to time were either too general or they were absent altogether:

(12) *When I was young I was swimming.*

(13) *I was reading this book.*

In the case of the latter, the learners often struggled with both form and meaning: in a number of cases, they used other or non-existent forms, the auxiliary 'be' was frequently omitted, and references to a specific time in the future were often missing:

(14) *The earth will have been destroyed.*

(15) *We are watching TV tonight.*

(16) *I will being in Scotland next year.*

(17) *He will taking about job next week.*

(18) *I will be eating dinner.*

Perfectly accurate examples like the ones below were much more common in the Past Continuous:

(19) *I was doing my homework when the phone rang.*

(20) *Tomorrow at 7 o'clock I will be going to London.*

- Perfect aspect

In the Present Perfect (21) and Past Perfect (22) sentences, the selection of incorrect forms was a relatively common problem. With the Future Perfect (23-25), problems of form were very severe. For example:

(21) *I've ate my breakfast.*

(22) *I had had met my friend before I came home yesterday.*

(23) *Tom will made his homework since 8 pm.*

(24) *Next Friday my project will be finished.*

(25) *In two years I would finished this school.*

As for the meaning of the Present Perfect, in a number of cases the learners seemed not to realize that even though a particular time expression did not say exactly when some action occurred, it was incompatible with the Present Perfect:

(26) *Some years ago, I've done a lot of stupid things.*

(27) *I have played football last week.*

It seems that in the case of examples (26) and (27) it is the Present Perfect rule itself that is at fault: the way the description of its use is formulated is probably somewhat vague and may have misled the learners. This stresses the importance of clear and unambiguous semantic / pragmatic descriptions which can be reliably applied by learners (cf. R. Ellis, 2006; Westney, 1994).

In the case of the Past Perfect, problems of meaning chiefly had to do with the order of the relevant situations:

(28) *I took a shower. My mum had called me.*

(29) *We had been in my room when they came.*

Being able to form a correct Future Perfect construction usually meant that the meaning was clear as well. Examples like the one below were rare:

(30) *Next week we will have been to Greece.*

Some typical perfect aspect sentences accepted by the markers were the following:

(31) *I've just finished my homework.*

(32) *He was in hospital because he had had an accident.*

(33) *By 2020 I will have finished my education.*

- Perfect + Continuous

The Present Perfect Continuous posed few problems in terms of the choice of verb forms or appropriate time expressions (examples 34 and 35). Errors like the ones in (36) and (37) were rather rare.

(34) *They have been building this house since 2006.*

(35) *We've been talking for an hour now.*

(36) *I have been learning in this school two years ago.*

(37) *I have been learning English since nine years.*

- Conditional sentences

Conditional sentences are complex structures both in terms of form and meaning. Each of them contains a subordinate clause which expresses either a real condition (the so-called type 1) or an unreal one (type 2 and 3). The subjects found it relatively easy to provide examples of type 1: the meanings they expressed were clear and the forms were usually correct:

(38) *If I study more, I'll have better grades.*

There were only three instances of the modal 'will' in the conditional clause, a potential problem for Polish learners due to the use of the future tense in Polish conditional clauses:

(39) *If you will finish this you should be rewarded.*

Conditionals type two (example 40) and three (example 41) caused serious problems of both form and meaning. In most cases in which the forms were correct (examples 42 and 43), the meanings were also clear:

(40) *I went to the cinema if you invite me.*

(41) *He would be a great teacher, but he hadn't learned a lot.*

(42) *If I were you I wouldn't go there.*

(43) *If I had had more free time I would have spent it with you.*

The teachers' predictions of rule difficulty in this study were for the most part very accurate. Furthermore, they correlate with predictions that could be derived from linguistic theory. If we apply Givón's (1991, 1995) functional markedness criteria for structure complexity, as Housen et al. (2005) did in their study, we will also be able to predict at least the general arrangement of categories in Table 3. That is, the learners' scores are the highest for the categories which are simple in terms of the number of their constituent parts, which occur frequently in the learners' textbook materials, and whose meanings are rather easy to grasp (e.g. habits, actions happening at the moment of speaking, finished actions in the past). By contrast, the scores are the lowest for categories which involved a lot of verbal material, which occur infrequently in the textbook, and whose meanings may either be 'mentally taxing' (hypothetical / unreal conditions, events relevant to a time following their occurrence, cf. Givón 1995, p. 57) or which may also be expressed by other verbal structures. For example, the meaning of the Future Perfect was rendered by some of the learners with the help of the Future Simple:

(44) *Next Friday my project will be finished.*

(45) *I will finish it before our meeting.*

Linguistic theory, then, can provide some general guidelines for assessing rule difficulty. It is doubtful, however, whether the guidelines could practicably be used to produce a multiple level hierarchy like the one in Table 5 (Housen et al. 2005 examined only two categories in their study). For this to be done in the framework of functional markedness, one would have to quantify the structural and cognitive complexity of each of the twelve categories and to estimate their frequency distribution in the learners' input in and outside the classroom. It is certainly more feasible to obtain teachers' difficulty ratings, which, as this study shows, can match learners' performance very closely.

The instructions that accompanied the teachers' questionnaire specified that in their judgements the teachers were supposed to take into account the difficulty that might be caused both by the structures referred to in the rules and by descriptions of their uses. The responses that were provided indicate that structural and functional complexity was indeed a key factor in their judgements: the top three categories are the Future Perfect, the Third Conditional and the Present Perfect Progressive. In addition to complexity, at least some of the teachers consciously used their teaching experience in judging the rules: in the comments that some of them contributed on completing the questionnaire, they spoke of the difficulties that they had experienced when teaching some of the structures. Despite these difficulties, the teachers generally did not regard the rules they were asked to evaluate as particularly difficult: the only rule classified as clearly difficult was the one concerning the Future Perfect. The moderate assessment of the difficulty of the rules is also shown by the data in Table 4: the mean score on the teachers' questionnaire was 28.4 points. It should be noted, however, that some teachers differed widely in their judgements: the highest score is more than twice as high as the lowest one.

One category, the Present Perfect Continuous, was clearly assessed wrongly by the teachers: it posed fewer problems than expected. The reason for its fairly high score on the learners' test can perhaps be explained by the fact that it is normally introduced relatively early in the instruction process: it may be a complex structure, but the learners had had ample time to familiarize themselves with it. The present study was not designed specifically to assess the relationship between the amount of exposure / practice and the effectiveness of instruction. However, as can be seen by comparing the scores of some of the categories, the latter does not simply follow from the former. For example, the Future Perfect and the Future Continuous were both introduced in *Matura Success upper intermediate,* but their success rates differ considerably.

The scoring system used in the study makes it possible to calculate the results of the learners' test with respect to form in its own right and without reference to use. These results are given in Table 6 below:

Table 6 Success rates for the twelve rules in rank order: form only

grammatical category	total score (out of 25 pts)	%
third conditional	**8.5**	**34**
future perfect	**14**	**56**
second conditional	**16**	**64**
future continuous	**18.5**	**74**
first conditional	**19**	**76**
present perfect	**20**	**80**
past perfect	**21**	**84**
present perfect continuous	**22**	**88**
past continuous	**23**	**92**
past simple	**23.5**	**94**
present continuous	**23.5**	**94**
present simple	**24**	**96**

Two observations will be made concerning the data in Table 6. First, even if we take the scores for form alone and compare them with the teachers' assessment of difficulty, the correlation between the two is still significant ($r_s = -0.79$, $p < 0.01$ for a two-tailed test). Thus, the teachers were also able to predict the learners' performance in terms of form only. Second, if we look at how the success rates for specific categories in Table 6 increased in relation to those in Table 3, we will see that it is the perfect aspect and past continuous that exhibit the largest difference. That is, the learners were in these cases considerably more successful in providing correct forms than in providing appropriate examples with respect to both form and contextualised use. It seems, then, that the semantic dimension of these two categories requires more attention during the instruction process. This confirms DeKeyser's (2005)

assessment of the difficulty of the perfect aspect and Sharwood Smith's (1974) account of the difficulties experienced by Polish learners with the past continuous construction.

DeKeyser (2005, p. 17) claims that "instruction is not necessary for the easiest structures and doomed to failure for the hardest, in particular where focus on form is concerned". Judging by the results of the present study, instruction aimed at (moderately) difficult structures can actually be quite successful: out of the twelve categories that were investigated only three had success rates below 60 per cent (the Third Conditional the Future Perfect and the Second Conditional with 34, 49 and 59 per cent respectively). It seems, then, that many structures and uses can be taught as meaningful rules, i.e. as descriptions that are meant to explain to learners how a certain aspect of a target grammar works and not as formulas which are to be memorized and applied mechanically by them. A not dissimilar view has been expressed by Green and Hecht (1992, p. 180), who say that 'semantic categories like aspect are probably best presented as explanations rather than rules, with learners' attention drawn to how they operate in longer contexts (…).'

Conclusion

The present study tested teachers' ability to assess learning difficulty of pedagogical rules. It shows that teachers can predict the degree of success that learners will have with rules of use: that is, they can predict how well learners will be able to form sentences on the basis of the metalinguistic labels of the relevant structures and descriptions of their use. The teachers' predictions were limited to the learners' use of explicit knowledge. It is for future research to determine whether teachers' assessment of difficulty is equally accurate in the area of learners' implicit knowledge. It is also for future research to examine whether, and if so to what extent, the results have been influenced by the shared L1 background of the learners and teachers.

In addition to investigating teachers' intuitions, the study was also a test of learners' ability to produce controlled output when prompted by a rule. In general, the learners passed this test: they succeeded in producing well-formed sentences in over 70 per cent of the cases. This means that metalinguistic labels designating morpho-syntactic structures can be meaningful to learners: learners can accurately construct or recall the relevant forms when provided with a label. Further, they can also place the forms in contexts corresponding to descriptions of their use.

The learners' performance on the test can be seen as providing an argument for formal grammar instruction in relation to the weak interface view of the relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge. In the task that the learners were required to perform, they needed to produce specific English structures on the basis of their metalinguistic labels and descriptions of use. Since the learners were able to proceed from technical terms to actual exemplars, it seems reasonable to assume that they should also be able to do the reverse: that is, they should be able to notice the relevant structures in input and relate them to the categories and rules that they have been taught. And according to Schmidt (1990), noticing is one of the necessary conditions for acquisition to take place. Further, by linking features of input to meaningful rules learners may also in some cases increase their understanding of the input that they receive, i.e. they may increase the amount of comprehensible input. If this is indeed the case, then explicit grammar teaching may lead to increased comprehension. And as VanPatten (2004) says (as cited in Wong, 2005, p. 34), 'to the extent that comprehension is a pre-requisite or part of acquisition (...), any instruction that leads to increased comprehension may also lead to increased acquisition.'

Swan (2007, p. 295) talks about two sources that should be drawn upon in designing language teaching programmes: applied linguistic research and 'the accumulated experience and reflection of generations of practitioners.' The present study shows that the latter should

indeed be taken seriously: it is an empirical verification that teachers' intuitions can be very accurate. For teachers themselves, it demonstrates that in implementing the instruction process they can exercise their own judgement of rule difficulty with confidence.

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