THE EFFECTS OF DIFFERENT TASK TYPES ON L2 LEARNERS’ INTAKE AND ACQUISITION OF TWO GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURES

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen a growing interest in the role of tasks in second language acquisition. A substantial body of research now exists investigating the effects of different task types and their accompanying instructions on learning. Less is known about how tasks affect intake and the relationship between intake and acquisition.

This study investigated the effects of 1) implicit and explicit inductive instructions and 2) various task types on both intake and acquisition of two English grammatical structures. Fifty adult ESL learners enrolled in private language schools in New Zealand were pretested with the help of a timed and an untimed grammaticality judgement test for prior knowledge of negative adverbs and adverb placement and were randomly assigned to either a dictation, an individual reconstruction, or a collaborative reconstruction treatment. Treatments were accompanied by either implicit instructions (containing only practical instructions on how to perform the task) or explicit instructions (drawing participants’ attention to the target structures and giving an example of them). Performance on the treatments was taken as a measure of intake, and talk-aloud reports were obtained to gauge participants’ awareness during task completion. Gain scores from pretest to posttest and to delayed posttest were taken as an indication of learning effects.

The results show that the explicit instructions of the inductive type used in this study were unable to affect participants’ intake and acquisition in comparison with the implicit instructions. Also, the three types of treatments did not have an effect on acquisition in many cases. Where there was an effect, the treatments differentially
affected intake and acquisition. Dictation led to high intake, but less acquisition, and the individual reconstruction treatment led to low intake, but greater acquisition. The collaborative reconstruction treatment was the most consistent of the three. The cognitively more demanding reconstruction treatments (i.e. those involving the retention of larger amounts of texts over longer periods of time) resulted in greater acquisition than the dictation treatment.

The main theoretical implications of the results are that the type of inductive and low-level explicit instructions used in this study were not sufficient to differentially affect intake and acquisition. Other, more explicit types of treatments may be necessary. The results also indicate that task types that are relatively easy, affect intake to a greater extent than more demanding tasks, but that more demanding tasks are more likely to affect acquisition.

On a methodological level, the concept of intake was found to be very difficult to operationalise, and it is suggested that additional measures be developed. Finally, the implications for teaching practice are that for relatively complex structures such as negative adverbs and adverb placement exposure to the input with minimal pedagogic intervention may not be sufficient. Teachers may also want to consider the effects of different task types on both intake and acquisition and both teachers and researchers need to be careful in drawing conclusionson the basis of immediate task performance.
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*It depends on what your definition of is is*

(Bill Clinton)

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Hayo Reinders
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xvi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Motivation for the study</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Outline</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 2: COGNITIVE APPROACHES TO SLA</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Cognitive theories of information processing,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>storage, and learning</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.1 Information processing</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2 Information storage</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.3 Theories of learning</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.4 Recent cognitive research</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Cognitive approaches to second language acquisition</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1 Cognitive theories of second language acquisition</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.2 The role of memory in second language acquisition</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.3 The role of attention and awareness</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in second language acquisition</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.4 Implicit and explicit knowledge and learning of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>second languages</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.5 Inductive and deductive learning</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Summary</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 3: INPUT, OUTPUT, INTERACTION, AND INTAKE IN SECOND</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LANGUAGE ACQUISITION</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Introduction</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2 Input, output, and interaction .......................................................... 63
3.2.1 The study of input ...................................................................... 63
3.2.2 Positive and negative evidence .............................................. 66
3.2.3 Input and learnability ............................................................... 71
3.2.4 Output and interaction ............................................................ 74
3.3 Intake ............................................................................................. 80
3.3.1 Definitions of intake ............................................................... 80
3.3.2 A working definition of intake .............................................. 88
3.4 Conclusion ..................................................................................... 91

CHAPTER 4: THE ROLE OF TASKS IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION
4.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 93
4.2 What is a task? ............................................................................. 93
4.3 The case for task-based instruction ........................................... 101
4.4 Task effects ............................................................................... 103
4.5 Types of tasks used in this study .............................................. 109
4.5.1 Individual learning ............................................................... 109
4.5.2 Cooperative and collaborative learning ................................. 110
4.5.3 Dictation ............................................................................. 113
4.6 Conclusion ................................................................................... 114

CHAPTER 5: PILOT STUDY
5.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 116
5.2 Research questions ...................................................................... 116
5.3 Participants .................................................................................. 118
5.4 Design and procedures ............................................................... 118
5.5 Target structure .......................................................................... 120
5.6 Materials ...................................................................................... 121
5.6.1 Treatments ........................................................................... 121
5.6.1.1 Dictation ....................................................................... 122
5.6.1.2 Imitation task ............................................................... 123
5.6.1.3 Reading comprehension task ..................................... 123
5.6.1.4 Listening comprehension task .................................. 123
5.6.1.5 Control group ............................................................... 124
CHAPTER 6: METHODOLOGY

6.1 Introduction .................................................................133
6.2 Research questions .........................................................136
6.3 Target structures .............................................................140
   6.3.1 Negative adverbs .........................................................140
   6.3.2 Adverb placement .........................................................144
   6.3.3 Selection of target items ................................................146
6.4 Intake .............................................................................147
   6.4.1 Operationalising intake ................................................148
   6.4.2 Intake in the present study ..........................................150
6.5 Operationalising acquisition .............................................151
6.6 Design ............................................................................152
6.7 Participants .......................................................................154
6.8 Procedures ........................................................................157
6.9 Materials ..........................................................................161
   6.9.1 Treatments .................................................................161
       6.9.1.1 Dictation ..............................................................163
       6.9.1.2 Individual reconstruction ....................................164
       6.9.1.3 Collaborative reconstruction .................................165
   6.9.2 Tests ..........................................................................166
       6.9.2.1 Timed grammaticality test ....................................166
       6.9.2.2 Untimed grammaticality test .................................168
6.10 Validity and reliability ....................................................169
   6.10.1 Treatments .................................................................169
CHAPTER 7: WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF THE INSTRUCTIONAL TREATMENTS ON INTAKE?

7.1 Introduction .................................................................189

7.2 The relative effect of implicit and explicit treatments on intake................190

7.2.1 Descriptive statistics for intake of negative adverbs ..............190

7.2.2 The relative effect of implicit and explicit treatments on intake of negative adverbs ..............................................191

7.2.3 Descriptive statistics for intake of adverb placement ..........191

7.2.4 The relative effect of implicit and explicit treatments on intake of adverb placement ..............................................192

7.2.5 Summary of the results .......................................................193

7.3 The relative effect of individual, collaborative, and dictation treatments on intake .................................................................193

7.3.1 Descriptive statistics for intake of negative adverbs ..............194

7.3.2 The relative effect of the individual, collaborative, and dictation treatments on intake of negative adverbs ..............195

7.3.3 Descriptive statistics for intake of adverb placement ..........195

7.3.4 The relative effect of the individual, collaborative, and dictation treatments on intake of adverb placement ..........196

7.3.5 Summary of the results .......................................................197

7.4 Discussion of the results ..............................................................198

7.4.1 The relative effect of implicit and explicit treatments on intake .................................................................198

7.4.2 The relative effect of individual, collaborative, and dictation treatments on intake .......................................................198
CHAPTER 8: WHAT ARE THE RELATIVE EFFECTS OF IMPLICIT AND EXPLICIT TREATMENTS ON ACQUISITION?

8.1 Introduction .................................................................................209

8.2 The effects of implicit and explicit treatments on acquisition (timed tests) ..............................................................212

8.2.1 Descriptive statistics for negative adverbs .......................212

8.2.2 The relative effect of implicit and explicit treatments on negative adverbs .........................................................214

8.2.2.1 Overall scores .........................................................214

8.2.2.2 Grammatical items ..................................................214

8.2.2.3 Ungrammatical items ..............................................215

8.2.2.4 Summary of the results ...........................................215

8.2.3 Descriptive statistics for adverb placement ......................215

8.2.4 The relative effect of implicit and explicit treatments on adverb placement ...........................................................217

8.2.4.1 Overall scores .........................................................217

8.2.4.2 Grammatical items ..................................................218

8.2.4.3 Ungrammatical items ..............................................218

8.2.4.4 Old and new items ..................................................218

8.2.4.5 Summary of the results ...........................................219

8.3 The effects of implicit and explicit treatments on acquisition (untimed tests) ..........................................................219

8.3.1 Descriptive statistics for negative adverbs .......................219

8.3.2 The relative effect of implicit and explicit treatments on negative adverbs ..........................................................222

8.3.2.1 Overall scores .........................................................222

8.3.2.2 Grammatical items ..................................................222

8.3.2.3 Ungrammatical items ..............................................223
8.3.2.4 Summary of the results ...........................................223
8.3.3 Descriptive statistics for adverb placement ......................223
8.3.4 The relative effect of implicit and explicit treatments on adverb placement ...........................................................225
  8.3.4.1 Overall scores .........................................................225
  8.3.4.2 Grammatical items ..................................................226
  8.3.4.3 Ungrammatical items ..............................................226
  8.3.4.4 Old and new items ..................................................226
  8.3.4.5 Summary of the results ...........................................226
8.4 Discussion ...................................................................................227
  8.4.1 Overall effects for the treatments on acquisition ...............227
    8.4.1.1 Negative adverbs ....................................................227
    8.4.1.2 Adverb placement ...................................................231
  8.4.2 The effects of the implicit / explicit instructions on acquisition ...........................................................232

CHAPTER 9: WHAT ARE THE RELATIVE EFFECTS OF THE INDIVIDUAL, COLLABORATIVE, AND DICTATION TREATMENTS ON ACQUISITION?

9.1 Introduction .................................................................................234
9.2 The effects of the three treatment types on acquisition (timed tests) .................................................................................236
  9.2.1 Descriptive statistics for negative adverbs .........................237
  9.2.2 The relative effect of the three treatment types on negative adverbs ...........................................................239
    9.2.2.1 Overall scores .........................................................239
    9.2.2.2 Grammatical items ..................................................239
    9.2.2.3 Ungrammatical items ..............................................240
    9.2.2.4 Summary of the results ...........................................240
  9.2.3 Descriptive statistics for adverb placement .........................241
  9.2.4 The relative effect of the three treatment types on adverb placement ...........................................................243
    9.2.4.1 Overall scores .........................................................243
    9.2.4.2 Grammatical items ..................................................244
    9.2.4.3 Ungrammatical items ..............................................245
9.2.4.4 Old and new items .................................................. 103
9.2.4.5 Summary of the results ........................................... 245

9.3 The effects of the three treatment types on acquisition (untimed tests) ................................................................. 246
9.3.1 Descriptive statistics for negative adverbs ....................... 246
9.3.2 The relative effect of the three treatment types on negative adverbs .............................................................. 248
9.3.2.1 Overall scores ......................................................... 248
9.3.2.2 Grammatical items .................................................. 248
9.3.2.3 Ungrammatical items .............................................. 249
9.3.2.4 Summary of the results ........................................... 249
9.3.3 Descriptive statistics for adverb placement ....................... 249
9.3.4 The relative effect of the three treatment types on adverb placement ............................................................. 252
9.3.4.1 Overall scores ......................................................... 252
9.3.4.2 Grammatical items .................................................. 252
9.3.4.3 Ungrammatical items .............................................. 252
9.3.4.4 Old and new items .................................................. 253
9.3.4.5 Summary of the results ........................................... 253

9.4 Discussion ............................................................................. 253
9.4.1 The relative effects the three treatment types ..................... 253
9.4.1.1 The effects of the dictation treatment ......................... 255
9.4.1.2 The effects of the individual reconstruction treatment ................................................................. 257
9.4.1.3 The effects of the collaborative reconstruction treatment .................................................................. 259
9.4.2 Where effects were found .................................................. 262

CHAPTER 10: DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

10.1 Introduction ........................................................................... 265

10.2 The relative effect of implicit and explicit treatments on intake and acquisition ............................................................. 266
10.2.1 The relationship between intake and acquisition ............... 272
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1  Chaudron’s ‘dimensions of tasks responding to input’ ......................99
Figure 2  Interaction between type and structure ............................................269
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Operationalising L2 implicit and explicit knowledge ..................48
Table 2 Design of the pilot study ..........................................................120
Table 3 Design of the pilot study treatments ........................................124
Table 4 Pilot study treatment and intake scores ....................................126
Table 5 Performance on pretests and posttests ......................................127
Table 6 Design of the main study .......................................................153
Table 7 Country of origin and first language of participants ....................156
Table 8 Number of participants in the implicit and explicit groups ..........162
Table 9 Number of participants in the dictation, individual reconstruction,
    and collaborative reconstruction groups .......................................166
Table 10 Correlation between tests and items, for negative adverbs ........180
Table 11 Correlation between tests and items, for adverb placement ........181
Table 12 Reliability figures for the grammaticality judgement tests ..........182
Table 13 Intake scores for negative adverbs, by treatment type
    (implicit/explicit instructions) .....................................................191
Table 14 Intake scores for adverb placement, by treatment type
    (implicit/explicit instructions) .....................................................192
Table 15 Intake scores for negative adverbs, by treatment type
    (dictation, individual reconstruction, collaborative reconstruction) 194
Table 16 Intake scores for adverb placement, by treatment type
    (dictation, individual reconstruction, collaborative reconstruction) 196
Table 17 Mean intake scores for the three treatment times ......................197
Table 18 Mean scores for the timed grammaticality judgement test
    for negative adverbs, by treatment type ......................................212
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 19</td>
<td>Gain scores for the timed grammaticality judgement test</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for negative adverbs, by treatment type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 20</td>
<td>Mean scores for the timed grammaticality judgement test</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for adverb placement, by treatment type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 21</td>
<td>Gain scores for the timed grammaticality judgement test</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for adverb placement, by treatment type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 22</td>
<td>Mean scores for the untimed grammaticality judgement test</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for negative adverbs, by treatment type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 23</td>
<td>Gain scores for the untimed grammaticality judgement test</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for negative adverbs, by treatment type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 24</td>
<td>Mean scores for the untimed grammaticality judgement test</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for adverb placement, by treatment type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 25</td>
<td>Gain scores for the untimed grammaticality judgement test</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for adverb placement, by treatment type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 26</td>
<td>Mean scores for the timed grammaticality judgement test</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for negative adverbs, by treatment type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 27</td>
<td>Gain scores for the timed grammaticality judgement test</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for negative adverbs, by treatment type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 28</td>
<td>Mean scores for the timed grammaticality judgement test</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for adverb placement, by treatment type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 29</td>
<td>Gain scores for the timed grammaticality judgement test</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for adverb placement, by treatment type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 30</td>
<td>Mean scores for the untimed grammaticality judgement test</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for negative adverbs, by treatment type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 31</td>
<td>Gain scores for the untimed grammaticality judgement test</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
for negative adverbs, by treatment type ...........................................247

Table 32 Mean scores for the untimed grammaticality judgement test
for adverb placement, by treatment type ...........................................250

Table 33 Gain scores for the untimed grammaticality judgement test
for adverb placement, by treatment type ...........................................251

Table 34 ANOVA for type, structure, and time for untimed tests,
grammatical items .................................................................268