

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 conclusions on 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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¹ For the uninitiated, this is the name of a cocktail. What were you thinking?

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	xv
LIST OF TABLES	xvi

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Motivation for the study	1
1.2 Outline	4

CHAPTER 2: COGNITIVE APPROACHES TO SLA

2.1 Introduction	5
2.2 Cognitive theories of information processing, storage, and learning	5
2.2.1 Information processing.....	5
2.2.2 Information storage	11
2.2.3 Theories of learning	16
2.2.4 Recent cognitive research	22
2.3 Cognitive approaches to second language acquisition	24
2.3.1 Cognitive theories of second language acquisition.....	24
2.3.2 The role of memory in second language acquisition.....	31
2.3.3 The role of attention and awareness in second language acquisition.....	37
2.3.4 Implicit and explicit knowledge and learning of second languages	45
2.3.5 Inductive and deductive learning	57
2.4 Summary	59

CHAPTER 3: INPUT, OUTPUT, INTERACTION, AND INTAKE IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

3.1 Introduction	63
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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

5.6.2	Test of intake	124
5.6.3	Pretests and posttests	125
5.6.3.1	Grammaticality Judgement Test	125
5.6.3.2	Jumbled Sentences Test	125
5.7	Results	126
5.7.1	Treatments and test of intake	126
5.7.2	Tests	127
5.8	Discussion	128
5.9	Changes resulting from the pilot study	130

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

6.10.2 Verbal protocols	170
6.10.3 Tests	174
6.11 Analysis of the results	182
6.11.1 Performance data from the treatments	183
6.10.2 Data from the verbal reports	184
6.11.3 Timed grammaticality judgements	185
6.11.4 Untimed grammaticality judgements	186
6.11.5 Statistical analyses	187

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

7.4.2.1 Dictation	201
7.4.2.2 The individual reconstruction treatment	202
7.4.2.3 The collaborative reconstruction treatment	204
7.4.3 Additional information from the talk-aloud protocols	205
7.4.4 Summary of the results	208

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

10.2.2 Performance on timed and untimed tests	273
10.3 The relative effect of the individual, collaborative, and dictation treatments on intake and acquisition	273
10.4 Additional findings	281
10.5 Summary of the results	283
 CHAPTER 11: CONCLUSION	
11.1 Introduction	286
11.2 Summary of the results	286
11.3 Theoretical implications	287
11.4 Implications for teaching	290
11.5 Limitations of the study	293
11.6 Suggestions for further research	297
 LIST OF REFERENCES	 300
 APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Ethics forms	351
Appendix B: Pilot study results	356
Appendix C: Items used in the main study	359
Appendix D: Background questionnaire	362
Appendix E: Teacher questionnaire	364
Appendix F: Sample transcription	367
Appendix A: Treatment instructions and texts	374
Appendix A: Instructions and items for the grammaticality judgement tests.....	398

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 19	Gain scores for the timed grammaticality judgement test for negative adverbs, by treatment type	213
Table 20	Mean scores for the timed grammaticality judgement test for adverb placement, by treatment type	216
Table 21	Gain scores for the timed grammaticality judgement test for adverb placement, by treatment type	216
Table 22	Mean scores for the untimed grammaticality judgement test for negative adverbs, by treatment type	220
Table 23	Gain scores for the untimed grammaticality judgement test for negative adverbs, by treatment type	221
Table 24	Mean scores for the untimed grammaticality judgement test for adverb placement, by treatment type	224
Table 25	Gain scores for the untimed grammaticality judgement test for adverb placement, by treatment type	224
Table 26	Mean scores for the timed grammaticality judgement test for negative adverbs, by treatment type	237
Table 27	Gain scores for the timed grammaticality judgement test for negative adverbs, by treatment type	238
Table 28	Mean scores for the timed grammaticality judgement test for adverb placement, by treatment type	241
Table 29	Gain scores for the timed grammaticality judgement test for adverb placement, by treatment type	242
Table 30	Mean scores for the untimed grammaticality judgement test for negative adverbs, by treatment type	246
Table 31	Gain scores for the untimed grammaticality judgement test	

	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