Critically Evaluate Explicit Knowledge and Implicit Knowledge Learning of English Language in Chinese-Foreign Cooperative Universities

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Abstract

With the development of internationalization and globalization, Chinese-foreign cooperative universities are established to attract more international scholars and students, and provide more chances for Chinese students to experience English Medium Instruction (EMI) courses. From the cooperative universities' official website pages, the universities propaganda English immersion education. In that case, the learning of academic content knowledge requires students' English proficiency level to achieve to an exact extent. Under this circumstance, it is discussed how students in the Chinese-foreign cooperative universities learn the explicit and implicit knowledge of the English language during the EMI courses in the Chinese-foreign cooperative universities, and how the two learning modes interface with each other.

Keywords: explicit knowledge learning, implicit knowledge learning, English language learning, Chinese-foreign cooperative university

1. Introduction

According to Mitchell, Myles and Marsden (Marsden, E., Mitchell, R., & Myles, F., 2013), implicit learning "usually refers to situations in which the learning was both incidental and without awareness" and implicit knowledge is understood as affecting learners' behaviours unconsciously and is used automatically. In contrast, explicit learning refers to operating a language rule rather than understanding it, instead, learning with awareness (Marsden, E., Mitchell, R., & Myles, F., 2013). Explicit and implicit knowledge are two constructs in cognitive approaches to second language acquisition (SLA). Although it is hard to completely divide explicit from implicit knowledge in students' second language learning, knowing how students learn their L2 can offer further suggestions about how languages are learned.

Chinese-foreign cooperative universities in China are popular among students and parents. Most curriculums in the universities use English textbooks, invite foreign teachers to teach academic classes, and require all teachers to speak English in class, as well as to use the communicative language teaching method (CLT) (Zhang, R., 2015). This was the author's experience of university learning. However, the majority of university students are taught using the grammar translation method (GTM) in primary school, secondary school and senior high school (Li, H., 2019), which focuses more on explicit knowledge. Therefore, a question arises as to whether the Chinese-foreign cooperative university helps students to improve both implicit and explicit knowledge in English learning. The following sections will first introduce the themes of implicit and explicit knowledge in second language learning, second, discuss the two constructs in relation to the Chinese-foreign cooperative university, third, examine the question in relation to the literature, and finally offer some suggestions for future changes.

2. Description of Explicit and Implicit Knowledge

Explicit and implicit knowledge learning belongs to cognitive approaches in second language learning theory. Learners can verbalize what they have learnt after explicit learning (Esteki, B., 2014), and learners primarily focus on form (Marsden, E., Mitchell, R., & Myles, F., 2013). This is to say that adult learners, or even teenagers, prefer form-focused instruction and speak or write their L2 by using rules. Furthermore, explicit knowledge

learning in SLA cognitive approaches often involves "declarative knowledge" (Marsden, E., Mitchell, R., & Myles, F., 2013) and the declarative memory system measures declarative knowledge. Explicit linguistic learning also has a strong relationship with working memory (Esteki, B., 2014). Working memory refers to the "temporary storage, manipulation and maintenance of task-relevant information during online cognitive operations" (Marsden, E., Mitchell, R., & Myles, F., 2013).

In contrast, implicit linguistic learning does not require central additional resources (Ellis, R., 2009), so learners express themselves in L2 according to their intentions. Based on SLA research, children learn L2 through implicit linguistic learning more easily than adults (Marsden, E., Mitchell, R., & Myles, F., 2013). Furthermore, implicit knowledge often refers to procedural knowledge stored in procedural memory systems (Ellis, R., 2005).

There are two competing theories concerning the development of implicit and explicit knowledge in SLA research. According to Ellis (Ellis, R., 2009), humans have a biological capacity for language acquisition, which is supported by Chomsky, and this also relates to the idea of a Universal Grammar. According to this view, learners do not need to pay attention to the non-target features. The second theory concerns the mental capacity for language acquisition, which is supported by Rumelhart and McClelland and Ellis (Ellis, N., 2008), in which learning is driven by input.

There is a debate in relation to explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge. Some researchers are conscious about what the "nature of the relationship is between implicit and explicit knowledge" (Suzuki, Y., & DeKeyser, R., 2017), which is called the interface issue. From Zhang's (Zhang, R., 2015) statements, there are three kinds of situations concerning the interface issue between explicit and implicit knowledge. The first is the non-interface position typically supported by Krashen and Zhang (Zhang, R., 2015), which argues that the function of explicit knowledge learning in SLA is to monitor performance and check output, which distinguishes it from implicit knowledge. The second is the strong interface position, which claims that learners' L2 is primarily acquired in explicit form and then transferred to implicit form by oral communications or versa vice (Ellis, R., 2009) (Zhang, R., 2015). The last is the weak interface position, which claims that the relationship between two constructs is related to learnability/teachability, and learning explicit knowledge can facilitate the acquisition of implicit knowledge (Zhang, R., 2015).

Based on explicit and implicit knowledge and relevant theories of SLA, there is an issue concerning whether the curriculums in the Chinese-foreign cooperative university improve the interface between explicit and implicit knowledge and so help students' output performance. Compared to Chinese primary, secondary and senior high school English learning experience, in which teachers use GTM to enhance explicit knowledge (Li, H., 2019), students in the Chinese-foreign cooperative university have more chances to practise their spoken English (Zhang, R., 2015) because they have to use English to communicate with teachers and finish tasks in class.

3. Issues Under the Context of Chinese-Foreign Cooperative Universities

Students who choose the Chinese-foreign cooperative university want to experience international learning environments and have more opportunities to practise English. Most students in the university are Chinese, although this kind of university tries to attract more international students to develop the internationalization. Meanwhile, the classes in the Chinese-foreign cooperative university try to use communicative language teaching (CLT) and encourage students to speak, write, and communicate with each other in English, which helps to create an immersed English learning environment for students. However, the majority of the students' previous English learning experience has been under grammar-translated methods. Given these circumstances, the students usually have more explicit than implicit English knowledge (Zhang, R., 2015). How can these students gain explicit and implicit knowledge and learn to use it when they come to their undergraduate study in a Chinese-foreign cooperative university?

Researchers have attempted to connect explicit and implicit knowledge with second language proficiency (Esteki, B., 2014), lexical and grammatical knowledge (Sonbul, S., & Schmitt, N., 2013), and language skills learning to see the relationships between them. Therefore, the explicit and implicit knowledge learnt in the Chinese-foreign cooperative university can also be analysed according to these factors.

Students can gain more implicit knowledge from the courses at the Chinese-foreign cooperative university because of the CLT English teaching environments. As the definition of implicit knowledge indicates, learners learn implicit knowledge unconsciously (Marsden, E., Mitchell, R., & Myles, F., 2013). The English medium instruction (EMI) teaching and learning environments in the Chinese-foreign cooperative university support students to listen, speak, read and write in English. Under these circumstances, students can gain implicit knowledge, such as oral expressions, from the teachers and English videos. Therefore, they can introduce their implicit knowledge into their assessments, which shows the implicit learning outcomes.

Learning that occurs at the Cooperative university also shows that explicit knowledge is a facilitator of implicit knowledge learning (Suzuki, Y., & DeKeyser, R., 2017), which shows the interface between the two constructs. Suzuki and Dekeyser (Suzuki, Y., & DeKeyser, R., 2017) discovered that learners who have a high level of education have the most efficient learning processes in relation to explicit and implicit knowledge. Students gain explicit knowledge in the English learning and teaching environments, know the grammar rules, learn new vocabulary and are trained in language skills. Next, they can apply these rules to other major assignments unconsciously.

Meanwhile, implicit knowledge can also be a facilitator of explicit knowledge for the Cooperative university students. The English learning environment in the EMI classes gives students the opportunity to hear the oral expressions from native speakers. They can acquire new expressions unconsciously and so use this knowledge in their own English presentations and assignments.

The assessments in the Chinese-foreign cooperative university, such as essay-writing and content knowledge presentation in English, require students to present their explicit and implicit knowledge, so the students can use the two constructs while doing their assessments. According to Zhang (Zhang, S., 2017), except when testing academic knowledge, the assessments in the university should be more like IELTS assessing students' 4 English skills. The assignments, such as English essay writing and presentation, can test students' output performances of academic knowledge and English skills (Tan, 2009). Esteki (Esteki, B., 2014) discovered that because students have high proficiency in English, they can use their implicit knowledge learned in the school in IELTS tests.

In brief, students can learn explicit knowledge from EMI courses in the Chinese-foreign cooperative university, and can acquire implicit knowledge not only from the EAP classes itself but also from other major classes taught in English. Assessments require them to use explicit and implicit knowledge in order to achieve at a high level. The two constructs interface during learning to help the student improve his or her English proficiency level and academic content learning.

4. Relative Concepts to Solve Issues

Learning explicit and implicit knowledge can help students solve problems in L2 oral production. Research on Chinese GTM classes in primary, secondary and senior high school students claims that students usually have problems in speaking and writing because they are not emphasized during English learning and English tests (Guo, X., 2009). Therefore, L1 interference and students' English learning environments are problems for students' output performance. Furthermore, students learn second language explicit knowledge may learn from their first language structure (Ellis, R., 2009), and as Zhang mentioned (Zhang, R., 2015), explicit knowledge plays a role in monitoring. According to this view, output performance is related to implicit knowledge learning. Therefore, in the Chinese-foreign cooperative university, students have more chances to practise spoken English and more chances to learn implicit knowledge through other subjects, which helps to solve the problem of non-English classroom environments. Gaining implicit knowledge in EMI courses in Chinese-foreign cooperative university makes students' oral expressions more natural (Esteki, B., 2014).

Multilingual turns occur in classes in the Cooperative university when learning explicit and implicit knowledge. Some teachers in the cooperative university are local in China but are requested to speak English in class (Zhang, S., 2017). In these EMI classes, teachers allow students to ask questions by using Chinese when students cannot express themselves in English properly. Therefore, students are not learning L2 or other subject knowledge from only English or Chinese, rather, both languages are used to teach. Another point is that although students are required to use English when doing assignments and presentations, students can use Chinese in their discussions. Trans-language happens here to help students comprehend explicit knowledge, while translanguaging in teaching is helpful to enable students to understand the target knowledge more easily than teaching by using only Chinese or English.

Learning explicit and implicit knowledge in the Chinese-foreign cooperative university is beneficial for students to become pluriliterate global citizens. The teaching method in the Cooperative university is usually CLT (Esteki, B., 2014), and teachers use English to teach major courses, which could therefore be described as transdisciplinary. Transdisciplinary approaches can be useful to promote pluriliterate global citizens. Furthermore, students gain both implicit and explicit knowledge from the EMI classes. In this case, students can use their explicit knowledge learned in class to check their implicit knowledge or versa vice, which helps students to "be their own teachers" (Yolanda, R, Z & Do, C., 2015).

CLT in the Cooperative university not only teaches implicit and explicit knowledge, but also trains students' meaning-making and cultivates intercultural awareness. The CLT class represents "the cultural boundaries of the host culture with full language immersion" (Tu, H., & Talley, P., 2014). In the class, students can learn oral

expressions from teachers, such as the tone of speaking a word or phrase, and use the knowledge next time when they speak. This is implicit learning, which is also required to understand the "utterance-token meaning" (Gee, J. P., 2014) of the words or phrases. In the Cooperative university, students can acquire the meanings of words through normal EMI classes. Furthermore, the students can learn different opinions from different cultures, because the Chinese-foreign cooperative university encourages to recruit many foreign teachers who come from other countries and are responsible for teaching EMI courses. Therefore, it is easy to foster students' intercultural awareness.

5. Significant Changes

The explicit and implicit knowledge learning acquired at the Chinese-foreign cooperative university changes can help to improve students' language learning from Chinese traditional English teaching, such as GTM. Explicit knowledge learning helps students to learn specific knowledge (Yolanda, R, Z & Do, C., 2015), and implicit knowledge learning helps to comprehend others' culture and the speaker's meaning. Under these circumstances, students can understand both "utterance-type meaning" and "utterance-token meaning" (Gee, J. P., 2014) of vocabulary and also develop intercultural awareness.

It is encouraged that both kinds of knowledge should be taught to students in the future teaching. CLT and TBLT are two suggested teaching methods which can encourage students to use the target language in class. When students listen to teachers' English instructions and then speak themselves, implicit and explicit knowledge is activated. Except for interactive activities, some quiet writing or peer practice activities can be designed for reticence, which help students to have time to reflect the knowledge they learn in the EMI courses (Tu, H., & Talley, P., 2014). In doing this, more students can get involved in the class to learn and use explicit and implicit knowledge.

Finally, it is advisable to apply a proficiency test before students begin classes. Different proficiency levels of students imply different comprehensive capacities in relation to explicit and implicit knowledge. Students who have a similar proficiency level can study together, which can improve learning motivation because the gap between students is small.

6. Conclusion

The EMI courses in the Chinese-foreign cooperative university are beneficial for students to learn explicit and implicit linguistic knowledge. An interface between the two modes of learning also occurs. Within the CLT learning environment, students improve their ability to make meaning and intercultural awareness is fostered. The learning motivation also improves.

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