



PROCESS: Journal of Professional Communication and English Studies

Journal homepage: <https://ejournal2.pnp.ac.id/index.php/PROCESS/index>

Instructed Second Language Acquisition in Chinese as First Language English as Foreign Language in Secondary Schools

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article info

Article history:

Received: 28-04-2025

Accepted: 22-05-2025

Published: 24-05-2025

Keywords:

explicit instruction

implicit instruction

integration

second language acquisition

abstract

In the field of second language acquisition, there have long been theoretical divisions and practical disputes between explicit and implicit instructions. Explicit instruction focuses on rule explanations but neglects language application, while implicit instruction emphasizes natural acquisition but lacks systematism. In order to complement the advantages of the two teaching methods, this study attempts to propose an integrated framework of implicit and explicit instructions based on Ellis's instructional model (2024), consisting of four parts: integration of teaching objective, integration of teaching content, integration of methodology, and integration of assessment. The current study tries to bridge the gap between explicit and implicit teaching approaches for effectively enhancing the teaching efficiency of foreign language classes in secondary schools. This current study provides a new theoretical perspective for the study of second language teaching approaches and offers an operational implementation path for classroom teaching practice. In the future, its applicability in different contexts can be further verified through empirical research.

1. Introduction

English is a compulsory course for Chinese first Language (L1) English as foreign Language learners (EFL) since Year 3 as the Chinese government education policy (MOE, 2022). Foreign language teaching (FLT) plays a vital role in the contemporary education system. However, it is confronted with many challenges in China, among which the most prominent problem is the lack of application goals, which leads to exam-oriented teaching and students' low interest in foreign language learning (Cai, 2017). Chinese primary and secondary school English teachers emphasize accuracy in exams, favoring to explicitly teach grammars by using more traditional teaching approaches such as the Present-Practice-Production (PPP) model (Chen & Dan, 2024). A possible reason that causes the current challenges for EFL that second Language (L2) learners could acquire higher scores in written examinations but have poor performance in speaking. In terms of language learning, examination results often fail to indicate the practical language application ability of L2 learners (Liu, 2000). Ellis (2024) proposes a teaching model to combine implicit and explicit instructional approaches in exam-oriented contexts. What's more, teachers in China are expected to design lessons that strictly follow the official syllabus, which requires the systematic coverage of specific grammar forms but neglects the actual application of foreign Languages (Chen & Dan, 2024; Liu & Ren, 2024). Facing these challenges, more and more researchers and teachers explore different teaching approaches to improve L2 learner performance.

Explicit and implicit instruction have been constantly evolved along with the development of cognitive psychology, linguistics and pedagogy in second language acquisition (SLA). Ellis (1994, 2024) systematically reviewed the comparative method studies between implicit and explicit teaching approaches, revealing that explicit instruction directly teaches rules and emphasizes meta-language awareness, while implicit instruction induces learners to discover rules through tasks and inputs independently.

In recent decades, one of the most important research foci in SLA is the teaching effect of explicit and implicit instruction of foreign language knowledge. Explicit instruction focuses on teaching grammar rules, vocabulary, and other L2 knowledge, which helps students master the language structure systematically. However, this kind of instruction may be too mechanical and lacks language in practice, making it difficult for students to use language to communicate flexibly. In contrast, implicit instruction emphasizes language acquisition through context, interaction, and other natural ways, which can stimulate students' interest and enthusiasm in language learning. However, implicit instruction may lack systematism, resulting in students' weak grasp of language knowledge. Therefore, researchers attempt to combine this two kind of instructions to complement each other (Ellis, 2024). For instance, the experiment of Spada and Lightbown (2008) found that adding explicit grammar explanations in immersive classrooms can significantly improve the accuracy of learners.

Therefore, it is of great significance to study how to integrate explicit and implicit instruction in a foreign language curriculum for secondary school students to improve their language ability and communicative competence under the exam-oriented teaching contexts in China. Based on the previous studies, this current study proposes an integrated framework to investigate the effectiveness of integrating implicit instruction and explicit instruction in L2 teaching for secondary schools.

2. Methods

The study of explicit and implicit instruction in SLA has significantly progressed. Explicit instruction refers to teachers explaining and elaborating language rules to learners explicitly. In contrast, implicit instruction emphasizes that teachers ask learners to discover and master language rules without providing a metalinguistic explanation (Ellis, 2004). In other words, explicit instruction is predetermined and planned, directing attention to the target form and fostering intentional learning and focus. Implicit instruction is delivered spontaneously and attracts attention to the target form. During the implicit FLT process, no explicit information is provided about the target language, but it invites incidental learning together with a focus on form.

Previous studies have confirmed the effect of explicit instruction on L2 acquisition, claiming that explicit instruction could better enhance learners' attention to target grammar forms. (e.g., Norris & Ortega, 2000; Schmidt, 1990; Sheen, 2006; Suzuki, 2021). For example, Sheen (2006) compared task-based language teaching (TBLT) and PPP on two English grammar structures in Canada, revealing that the PPP group outperformed the TBLT in acquiring two grammar structures (i.e., WH interrogatives and adverb placement).

However, other researchers also revealed that implicit instruction (Focus on meaning) could help L2 learners acquire L2 knowledge (e.g., Chen & Lambert, 2024; Ellis et al., 2019; Shintani, 2016). Shintani (2016) conducted an empirical study on two L2 grammar structures (plural-s and copula-be), indicating that the TBLT group was more effective for L2 learners to acquire plural-s than the PPP. However, there was no significant difference in copula-be.

The comparative method research between implicit and explicit instruction in SLA has also received research attention in China. Chinese researchers find explicit teaching approaches are more suitable for second language teaching in China than implicit teaching approaches (Gao & Dai, 2004; Liu, 2011; Li & Sun, 2019). For instance, Li and Sun (2019) examine the effects of different explicit instructional approaches on the learning of subjunctive mood by EFL learners and find that different explicit instructions have different effects on learning outcomes. However, with the influence of TBLT theories, there are still many scholars who have confirmed the effect of the implicit teaching approach on L2 grammar acquisition in SLA through a series of experiments (Chen, 2024; Chen & Lambert, 2024; Huang, 2009; Liu & Wu, 2014; W. Wang & L. Wang, 2023). For instance, Chen (2024) compares the acquisition of L2 Chinese discourse markers under explicit and implicit instructions. The study finds that subjects in the implicit group demonstrated better-delayed effects. W. Wang and L. Wang (2023) investigate the impact of explicit and implicit instruction on middle school students' acquisition of the English past tense of verbs, and find explicit instruction has superior immediate effects compared to implicit instruction, but implicit instruction exhibits better-delayed effects.

Thus, it is not easy to conclude which teaching approach is more advantageous. Based on the previous research, Ellis (2024) advocates TBLT, which involves not only implicit techniques, such as recasting students' erroneous utterances during the performance of a task, but also more explicit techniques. One teaching approach in foreign language instruction is difficult to meet the diverse needs of secondary school students. Integrated instruction is the main direction in the current English teaching reform, and the "explicit + implicit" pattern is more suitable for Chinese English learners (Cai, 2021). Therefore, based on the Ellis model (2024), combining explicit and implicit instruction may be a more effective approach in foreign language teaching.

3. Results and Discussion

Before diving into the application of the combined teaching approach, it is crucial to deepen our understanding of the multifaceted problems that impede effective foreign language learning among secondary school students. These obstacles are not merely superficial but stem from various underlying factors. This part will discuss three aspects: teaching concepts and methods, learners, and curriculum design.

Firstly, from the perspective of teaching concepts and methods, while students may be exposed to language through textbooks and teacher-led explanations, they often lack the opportunity to practice speaking and writing, which is crucial for language acquisition. Current teaching overly focuses on examinations such as the college entrance examination and neglects the practical language application ability, and thus Wen (2015) proposed the production-oriented approach (POA) to criticize the neglect of communicative ability by traditional teaching concepts. What's more, the ways of

evaluating English learning are monotonous, mainly consisting of daily tests and examination results, lacking the process evaluation and comprehensive evaluation of students (Wu & Zheng, 2020).

In addition, from the perspective of learners, their learning purposes and attitudes directly impact foreign language learning. According to Liu (2016), uncertain learning goals and negative learning attitudes make students reluctant to make corresponding efforts for English learning. Their academic performance will not be improved. In the long run, the motivation for learning will naturally decrease. In addition, the silence between teachers and students in foreign language classes is also very common. H. Zhang and K. Zhang (2009) conducted a multiple-case study and found that classroom anxiety and worry about making mistakes are two significant factors leading to silence. Moreover, these emotions or attitudes may come from weak foundations and poor oral expression skills.

Finally, the current curriculum design in many secondary schools in China needs further research. Ellis (2019, 2024) claims that any curriculum should consider how languages are learned. However, most of the foreign language curricula focus heavily on explicit instruction in China, emphasizing direct, systematic teaching of grammar rules, vocabulary memorization and translation exercises. These curricula often rely on teacher-led explanations, modeling, and guided practice. These teaching methods undoubtedly have their place but often lack the depth and authenticity needed for foreign language acquisition. Implicit instruction, on the other hand, involves a more natural language learning experience through exposure to authentic materials, communicative activities, and cultural immersion, allowing students to infer language rules and patterns naturally and fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the language through exposure and interaction. Unfortunately, this approach is often underrepresented in secondary school curricula, leading to an imbalance that hinders foreign language teaching effect and language development.

The challenge is to create combined instruction that leverages the strengths of both explicit and implicit instruction while mitigating their respective weaknesses. Therefore, it is imperative to balance explicit and implicit instruction in FLT. In other words, it is important to find a balance between structured, systematic teaching and natural, immersive learning experiences. This balance is crucial for fostering linguistic competence and pragmatic language use among foreign language learners, ensuring that they not only master the mechanics of the language but also develop the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in real-world situations.

A proposed integrated framework that combines explicit and implicit teaching approaches

In this section, the current study proposes an integrated framework that combines explicit and implicit teaching approaches, consisting of four crucial components: teaching objective integration, content integration, methodological integration, and assessment integration as follows:

Integration of Teaching objective

It is necessary to consider both explicit and implicit objectives when setting teaching objectives. Explicit objectives list the language elements students need to master, such as grammar rules and vocabulary collocations. Implicit objectives, however, focus on cultivating students' language communicative abilities and cultural awareness, which are achieved subtly through contexts, interactions, and other means. For example, when designing a course aimed at teaching the present continuous tense, we first make clear the explicit goal: to ensure that students can accurately grasp the structure and rules of the tense, which is the key to building the foundation of language. At the same time, we also attach importance to setting implicit goals; that is, through practical activities such as situational dialogue and role-playing, students can naturally use the present continuous tense in situations close to real communication to effectively improve their real-time communication ability.

Integration of Teaching content

According to Ellis (2019, 2024), the design of a syllabus requires two kinds of decisions to be made: (1) which content to include and (2) how to sequence the content so that there is a progression from simple to complex. Thus the content integration of this framework features both explicit and implicit elements. The explicit component involves structured lessons that systematically introduce grammar rules, vocabulary, and cultural contexts. The implicit component comprises supplementary materials like authentic texts, audio-visual resources, and interactive language labs, which immerse students in real-life language use scenarios. Therefore, in selecting teaching materials and resources, we strive to find a balance to meet the needs of explicit and implicit instruction. Specifically, we tend to choose materials containing systematic and detailed grammar explanations and rich real-life conversations. Such materials can provide students with a clear knowledge framework while stimulating their interest and engagement through lively dialogue examples. In addition, we also actively combine network resources and multimedia tools, such as online interactive platforms and video teaching materials to provide students with a more diversified and three-dimensional learning experience. The introduction of these resources not only broadens students' learning channels but also further promotes their in-depth understanding and flexible use of language knowledge and cultural elements while enjoying them.

Integration of Methodology

Methodological integration also integrates explicit and implicit techniques. Explicit techniques include direct instruction through teacher-led explanations, examples, and drills. Implicit techniques, on the other hand, consist of task-based learning, project-based learning, and collaborative activities that encourage students to discover language patterns and functions through practice. We can combine explicit explanations with implicit guidance. When introducing new language points, we can explicitly explain their meanings and usages directly. During the practice and consolidation stages, we guide students to apply the learned language points in real-life contexts to achieve implicit learning. Additionally, multimedia technology can also be used to facilitate integration. For instance, multimedia teaching software to display lively and engaging contexts can help students better understand and remember language knowledge points under the dual stimulation of visual and auditory senses.

Integration of Assessment

Assessment integration combines formative and summative assessments. Formative assessment emphasizes continuous evaluation through diverse means, such as peer feedback, self-reflection, and meticulous teacher observations during classroom interactions. Teachers' timely feedback and guidance are important in this kind of assessment. The summative assessment encompasses traditional tests and exams, which provide a snapshot of student's knowledge and skills at specific points in time. The summative assessment also extends to more innovative, performance-based assessments, such as role-plays, presentations, and written assignments that simulate real-life communication scenarios. By incorporating such assessments, educators can better understand students' communicative competence and adapt their teaching strategies accordingly.

Case design of the combination of explicit and implicit teaching approach for secondary school classroom setting in China

In this session, we present a case design as one sample for the combined teaching approach in China. The target form of the case design is English present continuous tense. Firstly, the English teacher could begin with an explicit explanation of the tense's structural components and usage rules explicitly, which serves as the cornerstone for deeper learning.

Immediately after this foundational phase, students are immersed in an implicit learning activity designed to reinforce their understanding through experiential learning. They watch a video clip of people engaged in various real-life activities. As they observe, they are asked to describe what each individual is doing in the present continuous tense. This activity reinforces their grasp of the tense and encourages them to connect the grammatical concept with everyday activities, thereby enhancing their linguistic competence.

After classroom interaction, teachers facilitate discussions by posing open-ended questions that challenge students to think critically and creatively and apply the present continuous tense in their responses. The discussion also encourages higher thinking skills and fosters a collaborative learning environment. To further grasp the concept, group work tasks are introduced. Students collaborate to create dialogues or short stories, naturally incorporating the present continuous tense within the narrative. This collaborative approach reinforces their learning and promotes peer-to-peer teaching, enhancing their social and communication skills. Throughout the lesson, formative assessment is conducted seamlessly through ongoing teacher observations and peer evaluations of group work. This ongoing feedback helps identify areas of strength and areas requiring improvement, enabling teachers to provide targeted support and guidance. Concluding the lesson, a summative assessment is conducted, challenging students to write a short story where the main character describes their daily routine using the present continuous tense. This final assessment not only assesses their mastery of the tense but also evaluates their ability to apply it within a creative writing context, which can show their linguistic proficiency and creativity.

In a short summary, applying this integrated approach also necessitates reflective practice. Teachers should regularly and systematically evaluate the effectiveness of both

explicit and implicit instructional strategies, making necessary adjustments based on students' feedback and observed learning outcomes. This dynamic process involves three steps: monitoring student engagement, adjusting instructional strategies, and promoting lifelong learning. More specifically, the initial step closely observes student reactions and participation levels during explicit and implicit learning activities, involving paying attention to non-verbal cues, verbal contributions and overall enthusiasm. These indicators can reflect the effectiveness of the teaching methods being employed. Subsequently, lessons and instructional approaches are modified based on what works best for different student groups. For instance, designing more interactive and collaborative activities might be particularly effective for introverted students. Conversely, extroverted learners might benefit from dynamic, group-oriented tasks encouraging frequent interaction and expression. Finally, reflecting on students' progress and encouraging them to take ownership of their learning by setting personal goals. Additionally, actively seeking out opportunities for autonomous language practice beyond the confines of the classroom can significantly enhance students' linguistic competence and confidence. Whether through online resources, language exchange programs, or community events, these extracurricular activities can provide invaluable real-world application and reinforcement of the skills acquired in the classroom.

However, it should be noted that the application of this framework is not simply integrating teaching objectives, content, methods and assessments, but rather requires the interconnection and interaction among these four parts to achieve the optimal teaching effect.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, finding the right balance between explicit and implicit instruction in a foreign language curriculum is crucial for fostering effective language acquisition and cultural awareness among secondary school students. By integrating teaching objectives, merging teaching content, adopting diversified teaching methods, and establishing a comprehensive assessment and feedback mechanism, we can create a systematic and contextualized learning environment for students to foster comprehensive development in language proficiency and communicative skills. While this study proposes a theoretically integrated framework that combines explicit and implicit instruction, it is important to acknowledge its limitation: the lack of empirical validation through controlled classroom experiments. Therefore, future research can implement this framework in actual teaching experiments and compare its teaching effect with the separate implicit and explicit instruction teaching effects to support this design's effectiveness better.

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