

The Effectiveness of Explicit vs. Implicit Grammar Instruction in ESL Classrooms: A Literature-Based Review

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 26 Jan 2026; Received in revised form: 23 Feb 2026; Accepted: 28 Feb 2026; Available online: 05 Mar 2026</p> <p>©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— <i>explicit instruction, implicit instruction, grammar teaching, ESL, second language acquisition</i></p>	<p><i>Grammar instruction plays important role in learning English as a second language. Scholars debate which method is better. Explicit grammar instruction teaches rules directly. Implicit instruction let learners learn grammar through speaking and reading. This article review many recent studies about these approaches. It explains theory, teaching methods, and effectiveness in ESL classrooms. Studies show that explicit instruction improves grammar accuracy and writing. Implicit instruction helps learners speak more fluently and communicate naturally. Some researchers suggest using both methods together. This combination gives balanced results for students. The article also discusses how teachers can use these methods in classroom. Curriculum and training should consider both approaches. Grammar teaching is not only about rules but also about communication.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

Grammar is a core part of language learning. It helps learners speak, write, read, and listen better (Ellis, 2006). Traditional ESL teaching often uses explicit grammar. Teachers explain rules directly and give exercises. Later, communicative language teaching (CLT) appears. It supports implicit grammar learning. Students learn through real communication not by rule explanation (Spada & Tomita, 2010).

Sheen (2002) said that finding the most useful teaching grammar method is a big concern for most of the linguists because Akakura (2009) says that each grammar structure cannot be acquired with the same method. Therefore, different techniques and methods have been conducted to be able to identify the best

method for grammar teaching until now. Therefore, different techniques and methods have been conducted to be able to identify the best method for grammar teaching until now. Plenty of theories have been suggested to see how second language (L2) can be acquired, how to carry out different approaches, and how to evaluate the learning process (Andrews, 2007). Among different methods, explicit and implicit grammar teaching has come into prominence but the debate about which method is better, 1. Explicit or 2. Implicit, still continues. Hammerly (1975) points out that the usages of implicit and explicit approach in terms of grammar teaching is one of the most stimulating and questionable topics. It has also consistently been discussed to find out the more effective method for teaching grammar since in the

19th century (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Explicit instruction **helps** learners know grammar consciously. They **can produce** more accurate language forms. Implicit instruction matches natural language learning. It focuses on internalizing rules by communication and practice in context (Ellis et al., 2006). Many scholars say both approaches **have strong points**. Teachers need to consider learners' need and classroom context. Combining methods **may give better result than using only one**.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Explicit Grammar Instruction

Explicit grammar instruction involves **direct teaching of grammatical rules**, supported by examples, exercises, and corrective feedback (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Learners understand grammar consciously. This approach is supported by focus on form theory. Theoretical support comes from **focus-on-form approaches**, emphasizing learners' attention to language forms within communicative contexts (Long, 1991). Students notice errors and correct them quickly.

One advantage is faster learning of complex grammar. Learners **understand difficult structures more easily**. It also improves accuracy in writing and speaking. Students **make fewer grammatical mistakes after practice**. Corrective feedback helps learners see their errors clearly. It **gives opportunity to improve language performance step by step**.

However, there are some challenges. Too much focus on rules **reduces natural communication ability**. Learners may think about rules before speaking. This **slow down fluency and confidence**. Over-reliance on conscious rule application may impede fluency (Fotos, 2002). Teachers should balance rule teaching with communication practice.

2.2 Implicit Grammar Instruction

Implicit instruction emphasizes **acquisition through exposure**, without direct rule explanations (Ellis et al., 2006). This approach follows Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985). It believes learners acquire language naturally through meaningful input.

It is often used in task based language teaching. Students notice grammar while doing communication tasks. They learn forms without conscious memorization.

One advantage is improvement of communicative competence. Learners **speak more naturally and confidently**. It also develops intuitive grammar knowledge. Students understand correct forms without thinking about rules. This method **reduces anxiety in classroom environment**. Learners feel more relaxed during communication.

However, there are challenges. Grammar accuracy **develops more slowly than explicit instruction**. Learners may continue making errors for long time. slower development of grammatical accuracy, difficulty mastering complex structures (Spada & Tomita, 2010).

Teachers should support learners with enough input and practice. Combining implicit exposure with some guidance **may improve overall language development**.

2.3 Comparative Perspectives

Many researchers support a balanced grammar teaching approach. They suggest using both explicit and implicit instruction together. Explicit teaching **helps learners understand complex grammar rules clearly**. It gives conscious knowledge and accuracy. Implicit instruction support natural communication. It **helps learners develop fluency and automatic language use**. Students learn grammar through practice and exposure.

Meta-analyses indicate that **both approaches are effective**, depending on learner level, instructional context, and the grammatical feature being taught (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Widodo, 2006). Some grammar forms **require direct explanation for clear understanding**. Other forms can be learned through communication. Teachers should adjust instruction based on student needs. A combined approach **provides better balance between accuracy and fluency**. This method support both grammatical knowledge and communicative competence in ESL learning.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Studies on Explicit Instruction

Empirical studies show that explicit instruction enhances **grammatical accuracy and writing skills**:

Study	Participants	Method	Key Findings
Ellis et al., 2006	University ESL learners	Explicit corrective feedback	Improved receptive and productive grammar knowledge
Widodo, 2006	University EFL learners	Structured grammar exercises	Significant improvement in written accuracy
Spada & Tomita, 2010	Adult ESL learners	Explicit rule explanation	Effective for complex/irregular grammar

3.2 Studies on Implicit Instruction

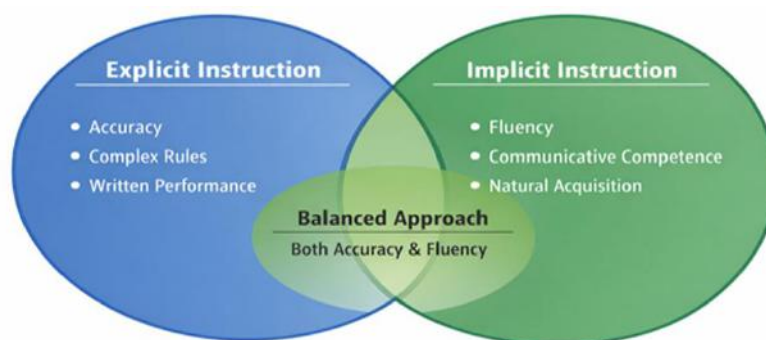
Implicit instruction promotes **fluency and communicative competence**:

Study	Participants	Method	Key Findings
Fotos, 2002	EFL learners	Task-based activities	Internalized grammar naturally; improved fluency
Ellis et al., 2006	ESL learners	Implicit corrective feedback	Improved communicative competence; slower accuracy improvement
Nassaji & Fotos, 2011	Low-level learners	Reading & exposure-based tasks	Effective for simple grammar rules

3.3 Comparative Studies

Study	Explicit vs. Implicit	Conclusion
Ellis, 2006	Both	Explicit improves accuracy; implicit supports fluency
Norris & Ortega, 2000	Meta-analysis	Explicit has stronger effect on grammar knowledge; implicit aids fluency
Widodo, 2006	Classroom study	Combined approach yields best overall learning outcomes

Figure.1 illustrates the relative strengths of explicit and implicit instruction:



IV. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Teachers should integrate both explicit and implicit grammar methods. They should explain rules and also give communicative activities. This combination **helps learners understand and use of grammar in real life situation**. Teachers must adapt instruction to learner level. Beginners **need clear explanation to build basic grammar knowledge**. Advanced learners benefit more from communication practice. They develop fluency and automatic use of grammar.

Corrective feedback is also important. Teachers use metalinguistic feedback during tasks. This **helps learners notice and correct their mistakes**. Authentic input should be included in lessons. Reading texts, videos, and real conversations **provide natural grammar exposure**. Students learn how grammar works in real context.

Teachers must balance accuracy and fluency. Structured exercises improve grammatical correctness. Communicative tasks improve speaking ability. Both activities **are necessary for completing language development**. A balanced lesson **supports learners to become accurate and confident English users**.

V. DISCUSSION

The literature shows that explicit instruction improves grammar accuracy. It is especially useful in writing and formal tasks. Learners understand rules clearly and apply them correctly (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011; Ellis, 2006). Implicit instruction improves fluency and natural communication. Students develop internal grammar knowledge through practice. They use language more automatically without thinking about rules (Krashen, 1985; Spada & Tomita, 2010). No single method is effective in all situations. Effectiveness depends on learner level, classroom goal, and cultural context (Norris & Ortega, 2000).

Many scholars recommend combining both methods. Teachers explain grammar rules first. Then they give communicative tasks to practice. This method balance accuracy and fluency together (Widodo, 2006). Learners gain both conscious and unconscious knowledge. Technology also supports grammar learning. Digital tools and corpus materials provide real examples of language use (Ellis et al., 2006). These resources help learners notice patterns. Integrated

instruction creates more effective and meaningful ESL learning environment.

VI. CONCLUSION

As literature review shows that both explicit and implicit grammar instruction **are important for second language learning**. Both methods support different learning outcomes. Explicit instruction improves grammatical accuracy. It is especially helpful for complex grammar forms such as verb tenses, articles, and sentence structure. Learners understand rules more clearly when teachers explain them directly. According to Ellis (1997), explicit knowledge helps learners notice grammatical forms and correct their errors. Direct explanation also supports writing development. Students **produce more accurate sentences when they understand grammar rules consciously** (Ur, 1996). Explicit instruction, thus, strengthens formal language performance and academic writing ability.

Krashen (1982) explains that language acquisition occurs naturally when learners receive comprehensible input. This process helps students use grammar automatically. They speak with more confidence and less hesitation. Implicit instruction improves fluency and communicative competence. Learners acquire grammar through exposure, interaction, and meaningful communication. They develop an intuitive understanding of language. Communicative activities such as discussions, storytelling, and task-based learning **allow learners to internalize grammar without memorizing rules** (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This method improves speaking and listening ability. It also encourages learner autonomy, as students rely more on communication strategies than teacher correction.

Many scholars suggest that a balanced approach gives the best results. Teachers combine explicit explanation with communicative practice. This combination helps learners transfer grammatical knowledge from controlled practice to real-life communication. Larsen-Freeman (2003) argues that grammar teaching should integrate form, meaning, and use. Learners first understand the rule, then apply it in real communication. This process strengthens both conscious and unconscious knowledge. When students practice grammar in meaningful contexts,

they remember it longer. Integrated instruction therefore supports complete language development.

Teachers should adapt grammar teaching based on learner level and classroom context. Beginners often need clear explanations to build a foundation. Advanced learners benefit more from communicative and implicit learning. Cultural and educational background also influences learning style (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Some learners prefer structured learning, while others learn better through interaction. Teachers must consider these differences. Flexible instruction improves learner motivation and success.

Future research should examine the role of digital technology in grammar learning. Online platforms, interactive applications, and corpus tools provide authentic language examples. These resources help learners notice grammar patterns in real contexts. Long-term retention of grammar knowledge also needs further study. Researchers should explore how learners maintain accuracy and fluency over time. Cross-cultural research may provide a deeper understanding of grammar instruction in different ESL environments. Overall, effective grammar teaching requires balance, adaptation, and meaningful practice. Both explicit and implicit instruction remains essential for successful second language acquisition.

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