Sétif 2 University

LA/ Master 2

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Lecture 11: Cognitive Accounts and Second Language Acquisition

Implicit vs. Explicit L2 Knowledge

A working definition of explicit knowledge is given by Ellis (2004, p. 229), "the conscious awareness of what a language or language in general consists of and/ or of the roles that it plays in human life". To put it more simply, explicit knowledge is knowledge about language and about the uses to which language can be put (ibid). The problem is, as Birdsong (1989) pointed out, that explicit knowledge is manifest in a "complex and contingent set of behaviours that defy simplistic assumptions and explanations" (p. 49). Moreover, explicit knowledge is conscious, declarative, anomalous, and inconsists (i.e., it takes the form of 'fuzzy' rules inconsistently applied) and generally only accessible through controlled processing in planned language use (Ellis, 2008). It is verbalizable, in which case it entails semi-technical or technical metalanguage. Whereas, implicit knowledge is intuitive, procedural, systematically variable, automatic, and thus available for use in fluent, unplanned language use. It is not verbalizable. According to some theorists it is only learnable before learners reach a critical age (ibid). And explicit instruction involves particular kind of being thought about during the learning process. In other words, learners are encouraged to develop metalinguistic awareness of the rule. This can be achieved deductively, as when a rule is given to the learners or inductively as when the learners are asked to work out a rule for themselves from an array of data illustrating the rule (Ellis, 2012).

Key Characteristics of Explicit Knowledge

EK is conscious in contrast to implicit knowledge, which is entirely tacit, learners know what they know; they are consciously aware of some aspect or

feature of the L2 (Ellis, 2004). EK is declarative, that is, it is comprised of facts about the L2. These facts concern both rule-based knowledge and knowledge of fragments and exemplars (ibid). L2 learners' declarative rules are often imprecise and inaccurate, learners may be able to recognize a specific metalingual in one sentence or one language but not in another. Moreover, the development of a learner's explicit knowledge can take place on two planes. It can grow in breadth as the learner accumulates more declarative facts about the language. It can also advance in terms of depth as the learner refines existing explicit knowledge, making it more precise and accurate and applying it more consistently across different contexts and languages (Ellis, 2004). Further, EK is generally accessible through controlled processing. This contrasts with the automatic processing that characterizes the use of implicit knowledge. One of the widely commented on uses of EK is to edit or monitor production, a process that is possible only in those types of language use that allow learners sufficient time to access the relevant declarative fact. For this reason, EK may not be readily available in spontaneous language use where there is little opportunity for careful on-line planning (ibid).

In addition, any language task that a learner finds difficult may naturally result in an attempt to exploit explicit knowledge (ibid). In terms of sociocultural theory, EK might be viewed a tool that learners use to achieve self-control in linguistically demanding situations. Also, EK is potentially verbalisable. It is found that the learners she studied (adult Japanese learners of English) were generally able to provide some kind of explanation for their choice of articles in a cloze task, although they had difficulty in giving specific reasons. Furthermore, EK is learnable. Implicit knowledge is also learnable, but there would appear to be relatively universal constraints on the ability of adult learners to fully learn an L2 implicitly given that only a very few learners to achieve native-speaker proficiency. In contrast, as Bialystok (1994) pointed out, "explicit knowledge can be learned at any age" (p. 566). The constraints that exist on learners' ability to

learn explicit facts about a language are of a different order, probably relating to individual differences in the analytical skills needed to memorize, induce, or deduce those facts. However, with careful instruction it may be possible to teach many learners a very substantial amount of declarative information about a language, although this is also controversial (Ellis, 2004).

Theories of Consciousness

Krashen (1982, 1985) put forward a distinction between two independent processes: acquisition and learning. 'Aquisition' is a subconscious process; while 'learning' is a conscious process which results in 'knowing about' a language. Krashen (1985) stressed acquisition. He claimed that conscious knowledge cannot become unconscious linguistic knowledge. However, Schmidt (1990) suggested that the notion of consciousness is both useful and possibly necessary in second language learning. Schmidt's aim was to reveal that conscious processes are important in second language learning, but unconscious processes should not be neglected in language comprehension and production, both of which contribute to second language learning. Schmidt (1990) presented some theories of consciousness to explain noticing and its systems, information processing theories and a global work-place theory. Noticed input becomes intake, which may be incorporated long-term into IL, and therefore involves effective processing. But a number of models in information processing theories concern with the notion of consciousness as a limited capacity memory system.

The limitations can be described along two dimensions: the focus of attention and information-processing ability. Humans are regarded as limited capacity processors. It is explained that attention focus is a function of task demands, which can be focal or peripheral, while information-processing ability is a function of how the individual deals with the information based on past experience and the characteristics of the input. The concept of attention results in a distinction between two modes of information processing: automatic and controlled processing. The distinction between a controlled process and an automatic process is not based on conscious versus subconscious awareness, but instead relates to the degree to which the skills in question have been established in long-term memory.

However, McLaughlin explained that "controlled processing is explicit and conscious, whereas automatic processing is implicit and unconscious" (1987, p. 152). Some information processing theories see consciousness as an internal programmer or executive control center. Information processing approaches generally stress the importance of awareness, not excluding mental functions (Jin, 2011). According to Schmidt (1990), theories of consciousness are similar in some sense. In these theories, consciousness has been considered as different concepts such as working memory, attention, control processing, and information exchange between different processors. Consciousness and unconsciousness have different functions in information processing, but consciousness is stated as a condition for dealing with "novel information, novice behavior, and learning" (Schmidt, 1990,p. 138). There are intermediate positions which posit that acquisition is a blend of the conscious and sub-conscious.

Consciousness and Language Learning Development

Schmidt (1990) presented three issues to discuss about the role of consciousness in second language learning. The first is the subliminal learning issue – whether conscious awareness at the level of 'noticing' is necessary for language learning. He denies subliminal language learning and emphasizes the importance of noticing, which becomes intake when learners notice consciously. The second is the incidental learning issue, that is, whether it is necessary to consciously 'pay attention' in order to learn. Schmidt argues that incidental learning is certainly possible in task-based language teaching. The last is the implicit learning issue, referring to whether learner hypotheses based on input are the result of conscious understanding or an unconscious process of abstraction.

However, Schmidt thought implicit learning is the most difficult question to resolve (Jin, 2011). Schmidt concluded that more research needs to focus on the role of consciousness in second language learning. However, McLaughlin (1987) argued that acquisition, not consciousness, is more appropriately used to study according to whether it involves controlled or automatic processing. Schmidt argues that the reason why the role of unconsciousness in language learning is overvalued is that second language learning seems to grasp an unconscious grammar and that many descriptions of

consciousness and unconsciousness are not clear. Whereas, the resaon why the role of consciousness is underestimated is that little research has been done to appraise what learners notice and think during their second language learning. He suggests that more research is needed into what learners are conscious of as they learn second languages (Jin, 2011).

Incidental Learning vs. Paying Attention

'Noticing' is important and available in language learning (Schmidt, 1990). Schmidt claimed that natural orders and acquisition sequences may constrain selective attention but not eliminate its role. Formal linguistic considerations, such as expectations, frequency, perceptual salience, skill level, task demands and the others, may explain the close relationship between 'noticing' and stages of L2 development (Jin, 2011).

Expectations

Schmidt proposed that instruction may play an important role in priming LLS to notice features by establishing expectations about language. Skehan (1998) stated that instruction provides structured input supporting for noticing by focusing attention on and enhancing awareness of language features. Ellis (1997) argued that instruction can draw learners' attention on items that they do not expect and as a result they may not notice.

Frequency

Schmidt claimed that items used more frequently are more likely to be noticed. If a language feature appears more frequently in the input, because of repeating instruction, the item will be more likely to be noticed and integrated into the interlanguage system (Jin, 2011). As Skehan (1998) suggested, a form may not be noticed at times when learners' intentional resources are stretched. Therefore, the more frequent an item is repeated, the more learners notice it.

Skill Level

Schmidt (1990) suggested that acquisition of new features requires the routization of previously learned skills. This is concerned with learners' processing ability of noticing new forms in the input, and an individual's ability to attend to both form and meaning

in L2 processing. No one has the same noticing ability. As Skehan (1998) described, some learners are better 'input processors', as they have a larger working memory capacity or they can process analytically and quickly within working memory.

Task Demands

According to Schmidt (1990), task demands refer to how an instructional task causes learners to notice particular features in order to carry out that task. Ellis (1997) suggested that some particular language features may be made intentionally prominent or the task may be designed to activate learners to process the language. The level of processing may determine the level of noticing. If the task demand, such as the exchange of familiar information, is slow, the level of noticing decreases, whereas if the task demand, such as the imagination decision-making, is high, the level of noticing increases (Skehan, 1998). Schmidt suggested that incidental learning without 'paying attention' is possible, if task demands focus attention on what is to be learned. Schmidt claims that learners learn most if they notice most, and learners who pay attention most may notice most.

Schmidt argued that both intentional and incidental learning involve conscious attention to features in the input. Schmidt further claimed that intentional learning refers to attention to input, which is of importance for explicit learning and may be necessary for implicit learning. Intentional learning also involves attention to form and test, which is important in "some kinds of artificial grammar learning and probably for some features of natural language learning, but not others" (1994, p. 198-99). "Incidental learning takes place along a continuum of conscious awareness. The degree of consciousness awareness of one's learning plays an important role in the clarity of learning" (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, p. 13). Ellis (1997) praised the distinction made by Schmidt as important and helpful, which recognizes that incidental learning is different from learning without conscious attention.

Marsick & Watkins (1990) argued that incidental learning, as a by-product of some other activities, is never ontentional and seldom explicit. van Pattern argued that "it should be clear that attention is not a product as are the referents for explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge" (1994, p. 28). That is to say, attention tied to processes is a resource, not a product, which is used as a continuum between explicit knowledge and

implicit konowledge. Ellis (2001) claimed that intentional learning has been proved to be more effective than incidental learning for both vocabulary and grammar. However, arguments for incidental learning are still advanced: it is impossible to learn a complete language intentionally, because there is too much to learn, intentional learning will influence learners' proficiency because it is more likely to lead to explicit than implicit knowledge (Jin, 2011).