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THE EFFECTS OF EXPLICIT SUPPLEMENTAL INSTRUCTION ON STUDENTS' LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

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Abstract: This paper reports on the initial results of the project “Supplemental instruction as a tool for improving students’ language competence at the Faculty of Philology”. The project started in 2017 at the Faculty of Philology in Stip with the main objective of determining the effects of supplemental instruction on improving students’ language competence. Based on the results of the placement test for all participants in order to determine their level of language competence, the participants were divided into two groups – A and B. The supplemental instruction in the first semester was conducted with group A, which was the experimental group, using explicit teaching methods, while group B was the control group. The results of the experimental group showed that there was a significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test, especially in the writing section of the test, while the results of the control group did not show any statistically significant difference.

Keywords: explicit learning, supplemental instruction, language competence.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper’s focus is on the initial results of the project “Supplemental instruction as a tool for improving students’ language competence at the Faculty of Philology” after the first semester. The project started in 2017 at the Faculty of Philology in Stip with the main objective of determining the effects of supplemental instruction on improving students’ language competence.

The participants in the project were first year students majoring in English, German or Macedonian Language and Literature. At the Faculty of Philology there is no entrance exam, therefore, students enrolling in these study programmes have different levels of language competence at the beginning of their studies. Our experience has shown that the students who are at lower proficiency levels face difficulties in mastering the material and achieving the learning objectives. A lot of studies all over the world have demonstrated that many first year university students are not prepared for university studies because they do not have enough background knowledge, academic skills and practical knowledge that would help them deal with the challenges in the new academic environment (Daskalovska et al., 2017, p. 1182). As a result, many students do not complete their university studies and most of them drop out of university during their first year (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordstrom, 2009; McInnis, 2001; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001).

Therefore, the subject of interest in this project was to determine what effect supplemental instruction would have on overcoming these difficulties, as well as the possible different effects of explicit and implicit teaching and learning. The project started with a placement test for all the participants in order to determine their level of language competence. Based on the results of this test, the participants were divided into two groups – A and B. The supplemental instruction was planned and conducted during the first two semesters, with two lessons per week. In the first semester, Group A was the experimental group and group B was the control group. The supplemental instruction for Group A focused on explicit learning of grammar and vocabulary as well as on developing the four language skills. Group B did not attend supplemental instruction. At the end of the semester, both groups were tested again in order to determine the effect of the supplemental instruction on students’ language knowledge and skills. During the second semester, Group A was the control group and group B was the experimental group. Group A did not attend supplemental instruction, while group B were taught the language implicitly by using literary texts according to the principles of language-based approaches to using literature in the language classroom. At the end of the second semester, the participants were tested again in order to determine the effect of this approach on their language competence. In this paper we focus on the results obtained at the end of the first semester.

2. EXPLICIT VERSUS IMPLICIT LANGUAGE LEARNING

In addition to finding out if supplemental instruction would help first year students improve their language competence, the project's objective was also to determine the effects of two types of instruction: explicit and implicit.

The issue of the effectiveness of explicit and implicit teaching and learning has raised many debates among researchers in several disciplines. Ellis (2008) has clearly managed to describe the distinction between these two types of language input. Namely, the distinction lies within the process of consciousness. He explains that "implicit learning is acquisition of knowledge about the underlying structure of a complex stimulus environment by a process which takes place naturally, simply, and without conscious operations. Explicit learning is a more conscious operation where the individual attends to particular aspects of the stimulus array and volunteers and tests hypotheses in a search for structure" (p. 3). Therefore, explicit learning is a conscious operation where the learner consciously pays attention to the stimuli and the structures, whereas implicit learning is a process where the learner acquires the knowledge unconsciously. A number of studies have shown that formal learning through focusing on form produces better and longterm effects (Lightbown & Spada, 1990). Other studies have demonstrated that implicit learning through reading can help learners acquire new vocabulary and grammatical structure of the target language (Brown et al., 2008; Day et al., 1991; Horst et al., 1998; Krashen, 1989).

Krashen (1987) makes a distinction between the terms *learning* and *acquisition* where *learning* refers to the conscious learning of the rules of the language, whereas *acquisition* is a subconscious process of acquiring the language that happens while learners are exposed to the language. The first process is formal or explicit learning, while the second is an informal, implicit or natural way of learning the language.

Stern (1992) suggests that instead of favouring one or the other way of learning, it is better to have a more balanced approach and to look at the benefits of both types of learning for individual learners. Namely, for more analytical learners who focus on the characteristic features of the language and prefer to gain conceptual knowledge and learn how the language functions, explicit learning would help them understand the basic principles and provide a clear and transparent picture of the language. On the other hand, there are learners who prefer a more global and intuitive approach to language learning, so for them implicit learning would be more suitable. Therefore, Stern concludes that the choice of the learning strategies and techniques depend on the context, situation, aims and styles of learning (p. 334-340).

Hence, the project was structured in a manner that would include both explicit and implicit language teaching methods and techniques to enable students to improve their language knowledge and skills.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As mentioned above, the main objective of the first phase of the project was to determine the effectiveness of supplemental instruction using explicit language learning methods. The study programme at the Department of English Language and Literature includes Contemporary English Language course with eight lessons per week. The aim of the course is developing students' language competence through learning the language system and developing the language skills using communication language teaching approaches. In addition to these eight lessons, the participants in the experimental group had two additional lessons. The same teacher conducted both the regular and the additional lessons.

3.1. Participants

The participants in the experiment were 29 first-year students of English language and literature, of which 17 were in the experimental group and 12 in the control group. The experiment started with 35 participants, but the results of the participants who were absent from one of the two tests were excluded from the analysis. The participants had studied English for eight years and were expected to be at an intermediate level. However, as the placement test showed, there were differences in their language competence. They were placed into the experimental and the control group on the basis of the results of the placement test, so that in both groups there were students with higher and lower language competence.

3.2. Teaching materials

The coursebook that is used for the Contemporary English Language course in the first semester is *Ready for First* (Norris, 2015). The main teaching resource for the supplemental instruction was the coursebook *Think First Certificate* (Naunton, 1996) which is at the same level as the regular coursebook. The supplemental instruction followed the same curriculum and included learning the language system and developing the language skills using communicative language teaching approaches with a focus on form and explanations given by the teacher.

3.3. Instruments

At the beginning and at the end of the first semester the participants completed a test which consisted of four parts: reading comprehension, use of English, writing and dictation. The test items were taken from *Cambridge First Certificate in English 3: Examination papers from University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations*. However, completely different test items were used for the pre-test and the post-test in order to avoid recognition of some of the test items from the first test. As our aim was to test improvement of the overall language ability, it was considered that different test items at the same level would produce more objective results.

The *reading comprehension* section of the test contained two texts. For the first text, the participants had to choose the correct answer to eight questions. The task for the second text was deciding which information referred to which person described in the text.

The *use of English* section consisted of four parts. The first and the second part contained texts with gaps and the participants had to fill in the gaps with the difference that in the first part they had to choose from four possible answers, while in the second they had to provide the missing word. The third part required the participants to fill in the gaps in a text with the correct form of the given words. In the last part the participants were given eight pairs of sentences and they had to complete the second sentence in each pair so that it has a similar meaning to the first sentence using a given word.

For the *writing section*, the participants had to write a letter in 220-260 words with given instructions. And for the *dictation*, a passage was taken from one of the texts in the same book.

3.4. Procedure

At the beginning of the semester the participants were informed about the project and its aims and were asked if they would agree to take part in it. All of them gave their consent. In order to divide them into experimental and control groups, a placement test was administered, after which they were divided into two groups. The next week the participants completed the pre-test. The treatment lasted for one semester during which both groups had eight language lessons per week, while the experimental group had two additional lessons. At the end of the semester, they completed the post-test.

3.5. Results and discussion

Tables 1 and 2 show the results of the pre-test and post-test of the experimental and the control group. The results of the experimental group (Table 1) show that there is some difference between the pre-test and the post-test, but it is not very big. The t-test for paired samples showed that the overall difference was significantly greater than chance: $t = 2.16$, $p < .05$. However, the different sections of the tests showed varied results: reading comprehension, $t = 0.81$, $p > .05$, use of English, $t = 1.09$, $p > .05$, writing, $t = 2.66$, $p < .05$, and dictation, $t = 0.99$, $p > .05$. Therefore, the only significant difference was seen in the writing section.

Table 1. Pre-test/post-test results of the experimental group

Test sections	Pre-test		Post-test		Difference
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Reading compr.	12.78	4.69	13.73	5.31	0.95
Use of English	21.55	8.43	23.02	7.65	1.47
Writing	11.57	5.13	15.89	5.74	4.32
Dictation	6.31	2.67	6.81	2.28	0.5
Total	52.23	17.78	58.55	18.36	6.32

The results of the control group also showed some difference, but it was smaller than the experimental group, and the t-test showed that it was not statistically significant: $t = 1.44$, $p > .05$. Similarly to the experimental group, there were different results for each section of the test: reading comprehension, $t = 0.36$, $p > .05$, use of English, $t = 1.23$, $p > .05$, writing, $t = 1.88$, $p > .05$, and dictation, $t = 1.53$, $p > .05$. Unlike the experimental group who showed significant improvement in writing, such improvement was not demonstrated by the control group.

Table 2. Pre-test/post-test results of the control group

Test sections	Pre-test		Post-test		Difference
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Reading compr.	12.68	5.47	12.31	4.93	-0.37
Use of English	22.59	9.49	23.99	9.27	1.4
Writing	14	5.13	17.34	7.23	3.34
Dictation	7.75	1.77	6.96	2.74	-0.79
Total	57.03	18.21	60.36	17.35	3.33

If we look at the pre-test results of both groups we will notice that the control group started with a bit higher results than the experimental group. Even though care was taken to make the two groups equal regarding their language abilities, it was not possible to form completely identical groups. However, these results show that even though the experimental group started with lower results, they managed to achieve better results at the end of the treatment.

We need to take into account the fact that the treatment lasted for three months with only two lessons per week, which amounts to 24 lessons. We cannot expect significant increase in the participants' language abilities in such a short time. However, the experiment showed that even with two lessons per week, we can help learners gain more knowledge and develop their skills. A more intensive programme and a longer treatment period would certainly produce better results.

Another factor that might have contributed to these results is the motivation of the participants. They knew that the supplemental instruction and the tests were not part of their regular studies and that they would not have any impact on their course grades, so some of the participants might not have taken the tests seriously and might not have made enough effort to complete all the parts of the test with equal attention. Moreover, the tests were rather long as they had four sections with several different tasks, so they were probably tiring for the participants. While checking the tests it was noticed that some of the questions were left unanswered, while for some of the tasks some of the participants had selected all the answers under the same letter (a, b, c or d).

What is significant is that the greatest improvement was seen in the writing task which is an integrative test item which requires the use of a variety of language and skills to complete the task successfully (Harmer, 2007). Therefore, the improvement in writing tasks shows an overall improvement of many aspects of language knowledge and skills.

4. CONCLUSION

Supplemental instruction at universities started at the University of Missouri in the USA in 1973 in order to help students in their learning and improve their results (Hurley, Jacobs, & Gilbert, 2006). It is usually conducted by more senior students who have achieved excellent results in these courses. The supplemental instruction is carried out regularly, usually three or four lessons per week, on a voluntary basis. Several studies have demonstrated that this type of instruction has positive effects on students' achievements (Arendale 1994; Jacobs and Stone 2008; Lewis et al., 2005; McGuire 2006).

The aim of this study was to investigate the effects of supplemental instruction on the improvement of the participants' language abilities. Even though the treatment lasted for a short time and it was not organized in the same way as the traditional supplementary instruction, the results are promising and indicate that organizing additional lessons for students who have difficulties with certain courses would enable them to gain more knowledge and skills that would make their learning easier and improve their results. Therefore, in order to make university studies easier and more productive and to prevent students from dropping out of universities, we need to find ways to help students in their pursuit of academic achievement, one of which may be providing supplemental instruction for all students that may require it.

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