The role of training condition and individual differences on the development of a complex form: An L2 study of the Spanish subjunctive

The effect of explicit and implicit conditions on second language (L2) learning has been a core issue for L2 theory and pedagogy. Overall, evidence reveals an advantage for explicit training both generally (Norris & Ortega, 2000) and for simple and complex forms (Spada & Tomita, 2010). However, the robustness of these conclusions may be limited by persistent methodological issues, e.g., explicit conditions receiving more exposure than implicit conditions. Additionally, there is a call to examine the effects of training condition in light of individual differences, such as aptitude (Housen & Simoens, 2016) and working memory (Tagarelli, Ruiz, Vega, & Rebuschat, 2016). Thus, the present study explores the relationship between training condition and individual differences for acquisition of a complex form by examining L2 development of the Spanish third person subjunctive in expressions of doubt.

Second-semester Spanish learners (N = 35 to date), with no previous knowledge of the Spanish subjunctive, were pseudo-randomly assigned to one of two training conditions—explicit (structured input proceeded by explicit information), implicit (structured input proceeded by meaningful exposure to match the time and amount of exposure provided by the explicit information)—or to a control condition. Performance was assessed during practice, following Fernandez (2008), and through interpretation post-tests. Individual differences measures included language aptitude (LLAMA test) and working memory (complex span tasks). Preliminary analyses indicate an advantage for explicit training during practice, replicating Fernandez (2008), but this advantage is not maintained on the interpretation delayed post-test, whereas the implicit condition maintains accuracy at the delayed post-test. Regarding individual differences, no relationships were found between performance during practice or development and aptitude. However working
memory was negatively related to accuracy under the implicit condition. Data collection is ongoing, but these preliminary results suggest that explicit and implicit training lead to different developmental patterns of a complex form, and that learners who rely on working memory may be less likely to benefit from implicit exposure.

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