

The Application Analysis of Grammar Learning Strategies for ESL Students: A Case Study of Lyuliang University and Shenyang Aerospace University

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Abstract

Guided by Oxford's grammar learning strategies theory, this study analyzes the use of grammar learning strategies by English as a Second Language (ESL) learners through a survey conducted at Lyuliang University and Shenyang Aerospace University. The analysis results show that through implicit learning with a focus on form, students are able to maintain a positive attitude and interest, which makes their grammar learning more effective. Explicit deductive learning helps students score efficiently in exam-oriented education, which is why it is widely used in English teaching. However, explicit inductive learning requires higher demands on both teachers and students, leading teachers to often choose deductive methods over inductive methods.

Keywords

ESL; Students; Grammar learning strategiest.

1. Introduction

In China, English is regarded as a second language because it is not the primary language for daily communication and its use is somewhat limited. Under the reform of the new curriculum standards, Zhang Lianzhong, a core member of the National English Curriculum Standards Development Group, proposed that "learning English is for effective application". [1] This requires teachers to pay particular attention to grammar instruction in English teaching and to cultivate students' speaking ability and flexible use of English through grammar teaching.

According to Shumin [2], grammar is the foundation of language skills, as it helps speakers organize their thoughts into coherent sentences, thereby improving the clarity and coherence of spoken language. Tilfarlioglu F. Y. and Yalcin E. [3] also argue that grammar is indispensable in speaking because it helps speakers construct grammatically correct sentences.

At the same time, learning strategies are crucial for language learners, as they serve as tools for improving communicative competence. If students are able to adopt effective language learning strategies, their language proficiency can be greatly enhanced. Oxford [4] points out that grammar learning strategies are not only cognitive behaviors but also psychological activities. Grammar Learning Strategies (GLSs) refer to the conscious actions and thoughts employed by learners to make language learning or language use easier, more effective, more efficient, and more enjoyable.

Through investigating the use of grammar learning strategies, this study aims to help researchers understand how these strategies are employed and explore the relationships among them.

2. Theoretical Background

According to Pawlak [5], one area that has been largely neglected in language learning strategy research is grammar learning. This study draws on the classification of behaviors related to

three instructional approaches in grammar teaching: implicit learning with a focus on form, explicit inductive learning, and explicit deductive learning.

In practical application, researchers distinguish between implicit and explicit grammar learning strategies. The former can be further divided into focus on meaning (in which grammar instruction is completely avoided in the classroom) and focus on form (in which students begin to pay attention to language forms when they encounter difficulties in expressing themselves during communicative tasks). The latter includes explicit inductive learning with a focus on form, in which teachers explicitly guide students to focus on linguistic forms and discover rules on their own, and explicit deductive learning with a focus on form, in which teachers provide grammatical rules and require students to apply them in specific contexts.

Regarding these three categories, Oxford and her colleagues have provided a detailed list of strategies. For instance, implicit second language learning strategies that focus on form include noticing language structures that cause problems during communication, paying attention to how others express themselves and imitating their expressions, and keeping a notebook to record newly learned structures. Explicit inductive learning strategies include participating in classroom discussions aimed at discovering grammatical rules, making hypotheses about the target structure and testing them, and carefully listening to the teacher's feedback on the structures used. Explicit deductive learning strategies include previewing lesson content, identifying key grammatical structures, applying the rules learned, and organizing regular grammar review.

Some related studies have also been conducted by Chinese scholars. Liu Pinpin [6], in a study on the relationship between English grammar learning strategies and language achievement, pointed out that there is a certain correlation between English learning performance and grammar learning strategies. She suggested that teachers should improve their professional competence, while students should adjust their attitudes toward grammar learning and actively explore appropriate grammar learning strategies. Shi Yiling [7] conducted research on the relationship among senior high school students' beliefs about English grammar learning, grammar learning strategies, and language proficiency. The results showed that grammar learning strategies are significantly correlated with language ability, and different dimensions of individual beliefs are related to both strategies and language proficiency.

However, most existing studies merely provide descriptive explanations of the relationship between grammar learning strategies and language achievement. Few studies analyze grammar learning strategies from the perspective of the three specific types—implicit learning with a focus on form, explicit inductive learning, and explicit deductive learning—in order to help learners select appropriate grammar learning strategies according to their learning habits and language environments.

Guided by Oxford's theory and based on data collected through questionnaires, this study conducts a quantitative analysis of Chinese college students' use of grammar learning strategies. The aim is to help learners select appropriate approaches for understanding and applying grammatical rules in different stages of grammar learning.

3. Research Design

The participants in this study consisted of 236 non-English-major students from Lyuliang University and 224 non-English-major students from Shenyang Aerospace University, with a total of 480 college students participating in the survey and completing the questionnaire. Among them, 460 valid questionnaires were selected for data analysis. The participants were selected through random sampling and voluntary participation. Since the students had already experienced College English learning during their first and second years, their responses were

considered beneficial for providing guidance for future learning of English as a Second Language (ESL).

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part collected participants' personal information, including gender, university, and grade level. The second part was adapted from a study conducted in 2012 on teaching approaches and the use of grammar learning strategies. Based on the original items, the questionnaire was revised to meet the needs of the variables related to grammar learning strategies, covering implicit learning with a focus on form, explicit inductive learning, and explicit deductive learning. In addition, the research instrument was submitted to experts in the relevant field for validation and confirmation.

According to the results of the reliability test, the research instrument was considered reliable and acceptable. After the questionnaires were collected, all responses were coded into Excel format and sent to the research center, where statistical personnel used SPSS to perform calculations and verify the results. Therefore, the process of data collection and analysis was regarded as scientific and reliable.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Students' Grammar Learning Strategies Towards EFL in terms of Implicit Learning with Focus on Forms

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. I notice (or remember) structures that cause me problems with meaning or communication.	3.49	Agree	7
2. I notice (or remember) structures that are highlighted in the text by italics, boldface, underlining, color-coding, etc.	3.55	Strongly Agree	1
3. I notice (or remember) structures that are repeated often in the text.	3.53	Strongly Agree	3
4. I notice (or remember) structures that are emphasized orally, through pitch, loudness, or repetition.	3.46	Agree	8
5. I notice (or remember) structures that are repeated extremely frequently in a short time period (e.g. the past tense in a series of stories over the course of a few lessons).	3.55	Strongly Agree	1
6. I notice (or remember) a structure which, when I encounter it, causes me to do something (check a box, etc.).	3.50	Strongly Agree	5
7. When I don't know the gender of a noun, I quickly consider clues like sound, meaning, and form.	3.50	Strongly Agree	5
8. I pay attention to how more proficient people say things and then imitate.	3.44	Agree	10
9. I work with others to reconstruct texts read by the teacher, which contain many instances of a particular structure.	3.38	Agree	12
10. I keep a notebook of new structures that seem very important or frequent.	3.53	Strongly Agree	3
11. I notice when someone gives me a corrected version of what I said, listen to how that version differs from my own, and try to improve what I said.	3.46	Agree	8
12. I compare my speech and writing with that of more proficient people to see how I can improve.	3.41	Agree	11
Composite Mean	3.48	Agree	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 – 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

Table 1 presents the implicit learning strategies with a focus on form used by students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. The overall mean score is 3.48, indicating that respondents generally agree with the use of these strategies. This suggests that students tend to adopt implicit learning approaches with a focus on form in their grammar learning. Implicit learning with a focus on form represents a type of procedural knowledge that cannot be directly perceived. It refers to grammatical rules and knowledge that exist in the human brain in a subconscious form and are used intuitively during listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Implicit learning emphasizes that learners should immerse themselves in a meaningful and comprehensible language environment in order to experience and judge language intuitively. Therefore, implicit learning plays an important and crucial role in grammar learning.

Stephen D. Krashen proposed that grammar instruction should adopt implicit approaches. Implicit grammar learning relies on a large amount of language input, and only within a sufficient language environment can students discover rules through their own activities. This may explain why, in countries where English is learned as a foreign language, explicit teaching methods are often preferred over implicit ones [8]. Chinese scholar Wang Yuanyuan also pointed out that the cultivation of interest in English teaching should not be neglected. Implicit grammar learning can provide more opportunities for teacher–student interaction, and the classroom atmosphere tends to be more active compared with explicit teaching methods [9]. Therefore, the application of implicit learning with a focus on form is an effective approach to grammar learning and can improve learning efficiency.

Among the listed items, respondents generally agreed with the statements “paying attention to or remembering structures highlighted in texts through italics, boldface, underlining, or color coding” and “noticing or remembering structures that are repeated very frequently within a short period of time (for example, the repeated use of past tense in stories across several lessons)”, both of which obtained the highest weighted mean of 3.55. This indicates that students are willing to learn grammar through texts, stories, and classroom activities.

On the other hand, the item “working with others to reconstruct a text containing a particular structure that the teacher has read aloud” received the lowest weighted mean score of 3.38. This result suggests that students’ enthusiasm for learning grammar through classroom activities and completing grammar-related tasks in English classes is relatively limited.

In summary, teachers can design diverse classroom teaching activities according to students’ actual situations in order to stimulate their enthusiasm for participating in grammar learning and enhance their learning motivation. This can help students master and internalize grammatical knowledge and improve their grammatical competence. Meanwhile, students should learn grammar through extensive exposure to language materials, deepen their understanding of the language, and cultivate their sensitivity to linguistic forms. In addition, students should attempt to create a language environment for themselves, for example by reading English newspapers and novels to increase exposure to English. In this way, they can transform themselves from passive task performers into active explorers of knowledge, participate actively in teaching activities, and develop an interest in learning English.

Table 2. Students' Grammar Learning Strategies Towards EFL in terms of Explicit Inductive Learning

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
13. Based on all possible clues, I try to discover the underlying rule.	3.51	Strongly Agree	2
14. I participate in rule-discovery discussions in class.	3.45	Agree	5
15. I write down structures on note cards so that I can think about how they work.	3.51	Strongly Agree	2
16. I keep a notebook of examples of any structure for which I am trying to find the rule.	3.45	Agree	5
17. I create my own hypotheses about how structures work and check these hypotheses.	3.40	Agree	9
18. I notice when the teacher leads me into an overgeneralization error (e.g. saying I goed), and then I think about what went wrong.	3.42	Agree	7
19. I participate in written brainstorming about possible underlying rules.	3.29	Agree	10
20. I check with others who are more proficient to make sure my rule interpretation is correct.	3.41	Agree	8
21. After discovering a rule, I try to apply it as soon as possible in a meaningful context.	3.46	Agree	4
22. I listen carefully for any feedback the teacher gives me about the structures I use.	3.53	Strongly Agree	1
Composite Mean	3.44	Agree	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 – 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

Table 2 presents students' grammar learning strategies in explicit inductive learning, with an overall mean of 3.44, indicating general agreement among respondents. This suggests that most students adopt explicit inductive learning methods in their grammar study.

Domestic scholar Wang Xiangling argues that inductive learning is a viable approach to language acquisition. Its salient features include consistency between use and form, as well as simplicity [10]. For example, comparing the basic forms of adjectives serves as a typical case. Learners play a more active role in the learning process compared to passive recipients. Increased engagement helps learners deepen their understanding and aids in correcting the language they have already acquired. It also promotes students' attention strategies and enhances learner autonomy and motivation. Brown [11] emphasizes that although it may sometimes be appropriate to first explain rules and then provide examples, most evidence from second language communication teaching indicates that inductive approaches outperform explicit methods in terms of rule acquisition and generalization.

The new curriculum standards point out that classroom teaching should be student-centered. Teachers should adopt participatory and collaborative English teaching models, fully leverage students' learning potential, help them develop effective learning strategies, and improve their autonomous learning abilities [1]. Inductive methods are a demonstration approach that moves from the specific to the general. By analyzing individual cases or subpoints, students summarize common features and draw general conclusions. In grammar teaching, teachers select appropriate language materials based on specific grammar items and provide learning tasks, while students summarize grammar rules through engagement with these materials. In this

process, students take the initiative in learning grammar rules, becoming the main agents of their learning; teachers guide the learning direction, with instruction serving as a supplement. Furthermore, explicit inductive learning can stimulate students' autonomy and initiative. Students can understand and master grammar rules through self-guided induction and summarization. Explicit inductive learning offers abundant language input, increasing students' exposure to the language and helping cultivate their linguistic intuition.

However, certain tasks, such as "participating in classroom rule discussions" and "written brainstorming," received lower scores, which may reflect students' difficulties in applying the inductive method in practice, especially without sufficient guidance. Therefore, teachers should provide appropriate support and guidance in grammar instruction to help students conduct inductive analysis in concrete contexts. Additionally, future teaching should encourage greater student participation in interactive tasks and practical activities to further enhance their autonomous learning abilities and the application of explicit inductive learning strategies.

Table 3. Students' Grammar Learning Strategies in terms of Explicit Deductive Learning

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
23. I preview the lesson to identify the key structures to be covered.	3.41	Agree	11
24. I pay attention to the rule that the teacher or the book provides.	3.55	Strongly Agree	1
25. I try to apply the rule carefully and accurately in specific sentences.	3.51	Strongly Agree	4
26. I make up new sentences using the rule.	3.43	Agree	9
27. I check my new sentences (or ask for help) to see if I understand the rule.	3.50	Strongly Agree	5
28. I memorize rules about frequently used linguistic forms/ structures (for example, verb endings, singular/ plural, noun-pronoun agreement, subject-verb agreement).	3.52	Strongly Agree	2
29. I memorize how structures change their forms (for instance, from a noun to an adjective, form an adjective to an adverb).	3.52	Strongly Agree	2
30. I color-code different grammar categories in my notebook.	3.41	Agree	11
31. I work with a study partner to apply grammar rules.	3.37	Agree	13
32. I schedule my grammar reviews by massing them closely at first, then spreading them out.	3.44	Agree	8
33. I paraphrase rules I am given, because I understand them better in my own words.	3.45	Agree	7
34. I make grammar charts.	3.23	Agree	14
35. I remember grammar information by location on a page in the book.	3.43	Agree	9
36. I use newly learnt rules/ structures in context as soon as possible.	3.48	Agree	6
Composite Mean	3.45	Agree	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 – 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

Table 3 presents students' grammar learning strategies in explicit deductive learning. The overall mean is 3.45, indicating that respondents generally agreed. This suggests that most

students hold a positive attitude toward explicit deductive learning methods and consider them beneficial for English grammar learning. Students generally believe that explicit deductive learning helps them master the use of language rules more quickly and prevents the formation of incorrect grammatical concepts.

Among the listed items, respondents indicated that they pay attention to rules provided by the teacher or textbook, which had the highest weighted mean of 3.55, ranking first. This suggests that students hold a relatively positive attitude toward acquiring rules from teachers or textbooks. On the other hand, the item “creating grammar charts” received the lowest score of 3.23. This implies that students are relatively less inclined to engage in self-regulated activities such as making grammar charts. Such activities may lack appeal, leading students to perceive them as both uninteresting and a waste of time.

Zhong Min also emphasizes that the university stage is a critical period for learning English grammar. At this stage, learners possess strong abstract thinking skills and a certain level of grammatical knowledge, allowing them to combine explicit deductive learning with inductive learning [12]. Specifically, grammar learning activities can follow these steps: first, engage in induction by presenting language materials, then summarize inductively. Through this process, learners can understand how to acquire and apply language rules in specific contexts, deepening comprehension and memory through self-reflection. For certain complex grammatical phenomena, learners can adopt deductive methods, which not only save limited classroom time but also prevent incorrect conclusions that may arise from individual differences during inductive learning. Moreover, striking a reasonable balance between induction and deduction and applying both flexibly is key.

Table 4. Summary Table on Students’ Grammar Learning Strategies Towards ESL

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Implicit learning with focus on form	3.48	Agree	1
Explicit inductive learning	3.44	Agree	3
Explicit deductive learning	3.45	Agree	2
Composite Mean	3.46	Agree	

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 – 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

Table 4 presents a summary of students’ grammar learning strategies in English as a Second Language (ESL) learning, with an overall mean of 3.46, interpreted as general agreement. This indicates that students are capable of applying elements from all three types of learning strategies, such as memorizing grammar structures, taking notes on new structures, attending to teacher feedback, discovering underlying rules, creating structure cards, focusing on rules, and memorizing rules. However, they are unable to fully or correctly apply these strategies at the appropriate time or in the correct manner. Since these three strategies encompass numerous specific techniques and students vary in personality and English background, they cannot execute the strategies completely effectively. Therefore, guiding and assisting students to recognize and use the correct strategies for grammar learning is crucial for developing their practical English skills.

Among the listed items, form-focused implicit learning received the highest weighted mean of 3.48, ranking first. It can be inferred that students place the greatest importance on applying form-focused implicit learning during the learning process. In other words, students believe that effectively utilizing form-focused implicit learning to notice or memorize grammar

structures will greatly benefit their grammar acquisition. This result suggests that students recognize communication as a fundamental element in their grammar learning.

As Zhang Wenjun [13] points out, implicit learning is an intuitive form of knowledge that learners use but find difficult to articulate. The more implicit linguistic knowledge learners accumulate, the more proficient they become in its use. In English grammar learning, implicit learning is characterized by learners being in an unconscious state, lacking learning motivation, and naturally acquiring language ability without formal instructional methods, strategies, or environmental influences. With the help of contextual understanding, students learn grammatical knowledge. This approach makes otherwise monotonous language learning vivid and engaging, combining instruction with enjoyment and embedding grammar knowledge deeply in students' minds. Overall, form-focused implicit learning allows students to maintain a positive attitude and interest, making grammar learning more effective.

Explicit deductive learning follows closely, scoring 3.45 and ranking second. This indicates that students value teacher explanations and guidance in class. In grammar learning, there are two extremes: on one hand, teachers minimize direct grammar instruction and provide abundant language materials for students to explore and summarize independently; on the other hand, teachers provide numerous grammar points directly. Due to long-standing grammar learning habits, individual abilities, and cultural backgrounds, some students prefer traditional direct instruction, showing less initiative in grammar learning. Conversely, explicit deductive learning can significantly improve efficiency, especially when preparing for exams such as the CET-4 or CET-6, making it a favored method among students.

In explicit deductive learning, students categorize and practice grammar rules while memorizing them to consolidate their knowledge. This approach is systematic and concise, with grammar knowledge primarily delivered in Chinese by the teacher, emphasizing rules and key points. It helps students achieve high scores in exam-focused education, which explains its widespread use in English teaching. However, this approach neglects the ultimate goal of language learning: real-life application. It does not train students' listening, speaking, or communicative abilities, resulting in a form of "silent English" where students focus on written language at the expense of oral communication.

Therefore, cultivating interest in English learning is essential. Implicit grammar learning provides more opportunities for interaction between teachers and students, creating a more lively classroom atmosphere than explicit instruction. In implicit learning, students observe, perceive language materials, explore and discover rules, and consciously imitate. This approach emphasizes the development of students' humanistic awareness and integrated abilities.

Explicit inductive learning received the lowest weighted mean of 3.44, ranking last. The results indicate that students face certain difficulties in applying explicit inductive learning in grammar study. Explicit inductive learning emphasizes that after exposure to a sufficient number of similar English sentences, students can analyze and summarize to identify the grammatical rules of the sentence type. Its key feature is discovering rules through application and practice. Therefore, students sometimes struggle to master or are not accustomed to using this approach in grammar learning. Explicit inductive learning can stimulate students' initiative and comprehension of grammar. Students are exposed to concrete English sentences while the concepts remain abstract. The process of moving from concrete examples to abstract rules in explicit inductive learning actually contrasts with traditional methods, which present abstract concepts first and then reinforce understanding with examples. Given that explicit inductive learning involves many specific techniques, students may sometimes be unsure how to apply it effectively in practice.

According to Song Jiasheng, explicit inductive learning is important for grammar acquisition. She notes that learners observe and summarize grammar rules and patterns from exposure to

large amounts of input containing specific grammatical knowledge. Being learner-centered, inductive methods enhance learners' initiative and engagement in language learning [14]. However, explicit inductive learning demands more from both teachers and students. Teachers must present materials and examples that align with textbook logic, learners' proficiency, and their cognitive patterns. Considering the complexity of preparing inductive lessons, teachers often prefer deductive methods, as the immediate results can provide learners with more linguistic knowledge in a short period.

From the teacher's perspective, it is therefore important to flexibly apply different grammar learning strategies based on students' needs and create diverse, interactive classroom environments that stimulate participation and improve learning outcomes. Teachers should encourage the use of implicit learning strategies to develop students' intuitive language abilities while systematically combining explicit deductive and inductive methods to ensure comprehensive mastery of grammar rules.

Students, on the other hand, should proactively select and combine grammar learning strategies that suit their individual learning styles. They should maximize the use of form-focused implicit learning to enhance understanding and memorization of grammar rules, paying special attention to listening and speaking skills during classroom and real-life communication. At the same time, students should strengthen their application of explicit inductive and deductive learning through classroom practice and task-driven activities, fostering active exploration of grammar rules and improving practical English proficiency. In summary, frontline English teachers must continually explore effective grammar teaching methods in college English, fully leveraging students' initiative throughout the learning process.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated and analyzed the grammar learning strategies of students at Lüliang University and Shenyang Aerospace University in English as a Second Language (ESL) learning, revealing the different strategies students employ and their effectiveness. The results indicate that form-focused implicit learning strategies received the highest emphasis in students' grammar learning, reflecting a general recognition that immersive language exposure and intuitive perception of grammatical forms help enhance both interest in and effectiveness of grammar learning. Explicit deductive learning strategies followed closely, suggesting that students value instructional approaches where teachers explain and apply grammar rules, particularly in an exam-oriented educational context, where this method is considered an efficient way to understand and apply grammar. However, the use of explicit inductive learning strategies was relatively limited, indicating that students face challenges when encountering grammatical phenomena that require inductive analysis, especially in the absence of clear guidance.

The findings underscore the importance of guiding students to apply grammar learning strategies correctly. Although students can use all three strategies to some extent, individual differences and diverse language backgrounds prevent many from fully and effectively employing them. Therefore, teachers need to flexibly integrate different strategies based on students' specific situations to help them better master grammatical rules. Future research could further explore how personalized teaching approaches can facilitate students' adaptation to various grammar learning strategies, thereby enhancing their overall English language proficiency.

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