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## **The role of explicit instruction in the acquisition of causative/inchoative transitivity**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this study was to see whether explicit instruction would help Turkish learners in their acquisition of English causative/inchoative transitivity alternations. In order to investigate the role of explicit instruction, a pre-test that consisted of a grammaticality judgment and correction task (GJCT), a preference task (PT) and a translation task (TT) was given to 53 second-year students attending Çukurova University English Language Teaching Department. After the pre-test, one of the classes served as the experimental group and the other as the control group. The experimental group received explicit instruction in the form of consciousness-raising activities while the control group was not exposed to any instruction on causative/inchoative transitivity alternations. One week after the treatment, we gave the post-test to both groups and 10 weeks after the post-test we gave the follow-up test again to both groups. At the beginning of the study, performance of the participants in both groups did not show any statistically significant difference. However, the mixed design ANOVA test revealed that performance of the participants in the experimental group differed significantly on the GJCT from that of the control group at the end of the study.

**Keywords** causative/inchoative transitivity alternation, consciousness raising, explicit instruction, second language acquisition

### **1. Introduction**

Transitivity alternations exist in all languages, however, the way such alternations are represented is not universal. Some languages, like Turkish, have derivational processes to mark transitivity alternations while others, such as English, have no overt morphology in the formation of such alternations.

Transitivity alternations can come in different forms: middle alternation, causative alternation, substance/source alternation or causative/inchoative alternation (Levin, 1993). Not all verbs can alternate in transitivity, however, in all languages there are change-of-state verbs which participate in causative /inchoative alternations.

Causative/inchoative alternation is represented in a different way in English and Turkish. Turkish, unlike English, has a special grammatical device (anticausative -Il morpheme) that changes the valency of verbs as illustrated in (1b):

1. a. Ahmet kağıdı yırttı.  
Ahmet paper-acc tear-past-3sg  
Ahmet tore the paper apart.
- b. Kağıt yırt-ıl-dı.  
Paper tear-anticaus-past  
The paper tore.

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Silvina Montrul investigated causative/inchoative transitivity alternations in different languages – Spanish, Turkish and English (1997, 1999, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2001d). In her most comprehensive study (1997), she investigated the interaction of universal principles and L1 knowledge in interlanguage grammars and whether there was a developmental pattern followed by speakers of typologically diverse languages. Her participants were Turkish and Spanish speaking learners of English, Spanish and English speaking learners of Turkish and Turkish and English speaking learners of Spanish. In order to test whether L1 plays a role in the acquisition of causative/inchoative transitivity alternation and whether L2 learners make transitivity errors with non-alternating, unaccusative and unergative verbs, Montrul utilized a picture judgment and a grammaticality judgment task. Her results from these three distinct but related studies confirmed that L2 learners know which verbs alternate in transitivity and which verbs do not and the errors occurred regardless of the native languages of the participants. She concluded that these errors were developmental and that L1 and L2 acquisition are guided by the same linguistic mechanisms. However, she also found strong L1 influence at the morphological level stemming from the morphological marking of alternating verbs in each language tested. In line with her findings, Montrul (1997, 2000) proposes a modular view of transfer in which she claims that some aspects of grammar are more likely to be transferred than others. In her view of transfer, argument structure is a more global aspect of language and universal linguistic principles play a greater role in its acquisition, and language specific aspects such as morphological marking are more likely to be transferred.

Following Montrul, Cabrera (2005), Cabrera and Zubizarreta (2005a) and Cabrera and Zubizarreta (2005b) investigated the acquisition of English and Spanish by Spanish and English native speakers respectively. English and Spanish are similar in constructing lexical causatives; however, they differ in specific aspects. In order to see whether L1 has a role in the acquisition of lexical causatives, they used an Acceptability Judgment Task (AJT) in which they presented the participants with sentences and asked them to rate the sentences as acceptable/grammatical on a 7-point Likert scale. They also asked the participants to rewrite the correct versions of the sentences that they rated in the negative end of the scale. Their results indicated that at earlier stages learners do not pay attention to lexical cues but rather to syntactic cues hence they appear to transfer syntactic properties of their L1 in the earlier stages of acquisition and in the advanced level lexical properties are more likely to be transferred. They also concluded that transfer is developmentally constrained.

### *1.1. Role of Instruction in SLA*

In the last decades, the role of instruction in SLA has been widely studied in classroom settings. Whether formal instruction, drawing learners' attention to target forms, enhances L2 acquisition has led SLA researchers to test the role of instruction taking different target forms into focus. Long's (1983) seminal review of the research investigating the effect of instruction postulates that instruction is beneficial for both child and adult L2 learners

on all proficiency levels. Norris and Ortega (2000), in their meta-analysis of research on the role of effectiveness of instruction between the years of 1980 and 1998, also conclude that explicit instruction is more effective than implicit instruction and more importantly that the effect of instruction is durable.

As input has gained much interest from SLA researchers, the field has seen a proliferation of studies focusing on the role of instruction and input enhancement. As seen in Norris and Ortega's (2000) comprehensive review on the role of instruction, instruction has been found to be effective especially when given explicitly.

Fotos (1993) investigated the effectiveness of Consciousness Raising (C-R) activities in raising the amount of noticing of Japanese EFL students. The instruction she provided included teacher-fronted grammar explanation for the first experimental group, and interactive, grammar problem-solving tasks for the second experimental group, and finally instruction with no C-R activity for the control group. Her results revealed that both types of instruction given to the experimental groups resulted in more noticing by the learners than the control group.

Leow (1998) investigated whether amount of exposure (single vs multiple) and type of exposure (teacher-centered vs learner-centered) to the same morphological unit had positive effects on the Spanish L2 development of adult learners. In order to test the effectiveness of single vs multiple and teacher-centered vs learner-centered instruction, he created four groups; single exposure teacher-centered, single exposure learner-centered, multiple exposure teacher-centered and multiple exposure learner-centered groups. His results indicated that multiple exposure and learner-centered groups performed significantly better on the same morphological unit.

Spada and Lightbown (1999) studied francophone students' use of English wh- questions with copula *be*, yes/no questions and wh- questions with auxiliary second. The primary focus of their research was on whether instruction aimed at a more advanced level than learners' current stage was more beneficial than instruction aimed at the next level in their L2 development. Their instruction intervention did not include any type of explicit rule explanation or L1/L2 comparison and contrast in English and French. Rather, they used materials that provided the learners with frequent exposure to the target form. They used a variety of measurements to test the learners' knowledge and use of English questions, such as oral production, scrambled sentences and a preference task. Their results indicated that explicit instruction provided with contrastive meta-linguistic information might be needed to contribute to the interactions between L1 constraints and developmental processes.

Investigating how instruction, L2 input, L1 and UG interact in the development of L2 morphosyntactic knowledge, Toth (2000) proposed a modular account of L2 acquisition. The aim of his study was to see whether input and instruction could counteract L1 transfer. The instruction he provided was of form-focused, communicative type. He administered pre-, post, and delayed tests to his experimental and control groups which consisted of a grammaticality judgment and two production tasks. His conclusion can be summarized in the following figure:

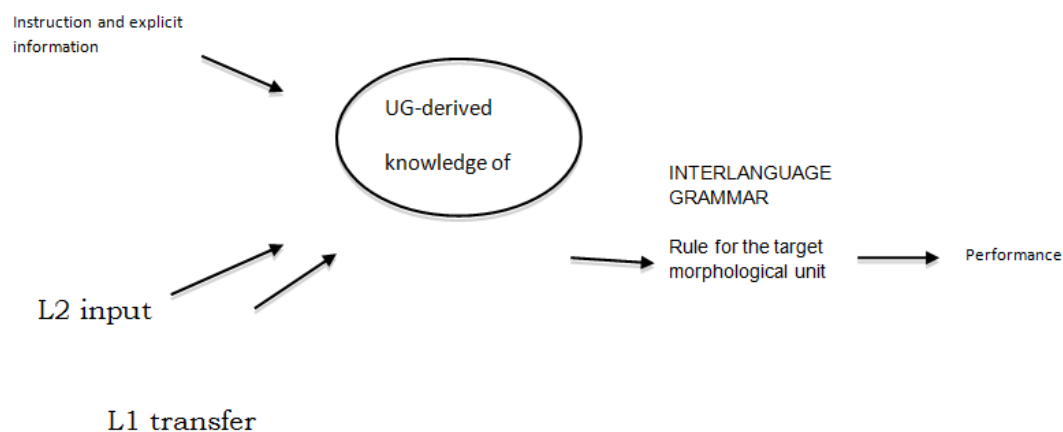


Figure 1. How instruction, input, and L1 transfer might interact with Universal Grammar to affect the acquisition of a morphological unit (adapted from Toth, 2000)

The results of his study showed that although many learners added the target morphological unit to their L2 grammar, L1 transfer and overgeneralization errors were also present. As seen in the Figure 1, Toth (2000) advocates a modular view of L2 acquisition since his findings suggested that L2 grammars are affected by multiple variables.

Özkan (2005), in her study investigating the role of input enhancement, found that learners did better on post- and delayed post-tests after receiving instruction in the form of input enhancement and C-R. She studied the acquisition of English reflexives and pronominals by Turkish learners. She gave a Comprehension and Translation Task to her students in the experimental and control groups before and after instruction. Her results revealed that students in the experimental group outperformed the students in the control group, and the delayed post-test revealed that the effect of her instruction was durable.

Bowles and Montrul (2008) investigated whether explicit instruction and practice with explicit feedback facilitate learners' L2 grammar regarding Spanish morphology. They had an experimental group that consisted of low-intermediate English learners of L2 Spanish and a control group with the same characteristics. The only difference between the groups was that the experimental group received instruction on the target form whereas the control group did not receive any instruction. The instruction provided was explicit explanation, practice exercises and corrective feedback. The explicit instruction given also included contrastive information between Spanish and English regarding the target morphological unit. Their findings indicated that explicit instruction and practice accompanied with explicit feedback facilitated the instructed group's knowledge on the target linguistic item. Another important finding was that although the instructed group performed better than the control group on the target form, they still significantly differed from the native speaker group. However, a weakness of this study is that there was no delayed test administered after the post-test. Therefore, we do not know whether the effect of instruction was durable.

On the whole, all of the studies listed above claim that instruction especially when given explicitly facilitates second language learning. However, Truscott (1998) criticizes the research that favors explicit research on the grounds that the effects of instruction is not durable and instruction only results in meta-linguistic competence and not in real language competence. He concludes that:

Thus, learners' success on tests of metalinguistic knowledge does not imply that they have acquired any actual knowledge of language. A large percentage of the studies routinely cited as evidence for the value of form-focused instruction did rely on tests of this sort (tests assessing spontaneous language use), so they do not constitute evidence for the value of instruction (or noticing). (p. 118).

Nevertheless, Truscott underestimates the large body of research which suggests that instruction is beneficial by claiming that instruction intervention is not only ineffective but also unhelpful. Furthermore, he does not suggest any solutions to overcome the problem of testing spontaneous language use.

Given that Turkish and English differ in how they represent causative/inchoative transitivity alternations, it is assumed that Turkish learners of L2 English will have difficulties in identifying and producing such transitivity alternations. In this study we wanted to find out whether explicit instruction could help learners in overcoming the aforementioned L1 effect in their acquisition of causative/inchoative transitivity alternations.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1. Participants*

The participants in this study were selected from the students attending English Language Teaching Department of Çukurova University, Adana. To serve our purpose, we did our experiment with two groups of 2nd year students as they had to take a course called 'Turkish Linguistics'. One group served as our control group whereas the other group was experimental. In total, there were 53 participants involved in the study. The ages of the participants ranged between 18 and 23.

### *2.2. Instruments*

#### *2.2.1. Grammaticality Judgment and Correction Task*

The first instrument we used was a Grammaticality Judgment and Correction Task (GJCT) which consisted of 40 items. In this task, participants were asked to read sentences and judge them as Correct or Incorrect and if they judged a sentence incorrect to correct it. The purpose of the GJCT was to test Turkish native speakers' intuitions about grammaticality regarding causative / inchoative transitivity alternations in English. With this task, we aimed to find out which alternating and non-alternating verbs were accepted and/or rejected.

In the task there were 10 alternating and 10 non-alternating verbs. Alternating verbs have causative and inchoative pairs whereas non-alternating verbs are either causative or inchoative and do not undergo

causative/inchoative alternation. Each verb appeared twice in the task. All the alternating verbs were grammatical whereas non-alternating verbs came in grammatical/ungrammatical pairs. Hence, there were 30 grammatical and 10 ungrammatical sentences in the task. Some of the non-alternating verbs were originally transitive while some were intransitive.

### 2.2.2. Preference Task

Preference Task (PT) had two parts. In Part A, participants were presented with sentence pairs with each alternating verb and asked which sentence they would be more likely to say. Part B of the task consisted of sentence pairs with non-alternating verbs. In both parts of the task, verbs were used first as a lexical causative and then as a periphrastic causative. The purpose of the Part A of the task was to see whether participants preferred lexical causatives over periphrastic causatives.

In Part B of the task, the purpose was to see whether participants preferred to use causative verbs as lexical causatives or periphrastic causatives and whether they preferred to use inchoative verbs as lexical or periphrastic causatives. In each sentence pair, one of the preference was ungrammatical. The hypothesis was that since Turkish requires morphological processes in forming causative structures, participants would be more likely to use periphrastic causatives in both tasks.

### 2.2.3. Translation Task

Translation Task (TT) had 20 sentences in Turkish and participants were asked to translate these sentences into English using the verbs given in the parentheses. The verbs given were all non-alternating verbs taken from the GJCT.

In this task each verb was given twice. The sentences with inchoative verbs conveyed an inchoative and a causative meaning. Therefore, participants were expected to use these verbs in a periphrastic construction to convey the causative meaning. The sentences with causative verbs conveyed a passive and a causative meaning. Therefore, participants were expected to use these verbs as lexical causatives to convey the causative meaning. The purpose of the task was to see the tendency of the participants in making causative and inchoative sentences.

## 2.3. The Procedure

The pre-testing session which included the administration of the GJCT, PT and TT took place in the 3rd week of the semester. The tasks were given to two groups on different days. All the tasks were given at once and the participants first worked on the GJCT and PT and finally on TT. The whole session took an hour for both groups. The course had started two weeks prior the pre-testing session. All throughout the course, the focus was on the linguistic properties of Turkish and comparison was made between Turkish and English in each aspect studied during the course. Pre-test was given in the third week of the course before studying Turkish phonetics and phonology. Causative/inchoative transitivity alternation was studied twice (in Week 5 and Week 6) during the course to ensure that all of the students taking the pre-test were present in the class. The post-testing session took



place one week after the treatment was over. Post-testing session took less time than pre-testing for both groups. Follow-up test was given to both groups in the third week of the 2011 spring semester (10 weeks after the post-test).

While preparing the lesson plans for the experimental group, we kept in mind the four components that Norris and Ortega (2000) found pervasive in the studies they reviewed:

1. presentation of rules
2. provision of negative feedback
3. exposure to relevant input
4. opportunities for practice

The instruction type we utilized was explicit in that we used rule explanation and direction to attend to forms and arrive at rules. The activities we created were C-R activities such as highlighting the target form, cross-linguistic exploration (comparison with Turkish), hypothesis building (writing the rules for the target form), reconstruction (manipulating the input to notice the underlying patterns), identify (searching for the target form in authentic forms), and so on.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Analysis of the Pre-Test for Both Groups

In order to find out whether control and experimental groups performed significantly different on pre-test, independent samples t-tests were conducted with the GJCT, PT (Part B) and TT scores. The t-test results are shown in Table 1:

Table 1. T-test results of the pre-test

Task	Groups		p
	Experimental	Control	
	Mean Scores		
GJCT	31.60	33.06	.120
PT (Part B)	9.35	8.88	.125
TT	18.70	18.88	.701

As seen in Table 1, the t-tests conducted on GJCT ( $t(51) = 1.58, p > 0.05$ ), PT (Part B) ( $t(51) = -1.56, p > 0.05$ ) and TT ( $t(51) = .38, p > 0.05$ ) did not reveal a statistically significant difference between the groups. This means that if there is a statistically significant difference between the groups on the post-tests, it will be due to the instructional intervention.

Since the Part A of the PT asked the participants to give their preferences between two grammatically correct options, it did not let us run a t-test on it. In order to see if the preferences of the participants in the experimental

and control groups differed significantly, we ran a chi-square test on this task. The analysis of the chi-square test revealed that the preferences of participants in both groups did not differ significantly on Items 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 ( $p > 0.05$  for all the items listed). Items 1 and 10 did not meet the requirements of chi-square test. Basing on this finding, we can again claim that any difference between the preferences of both groups at the end of the study will be stemming from the instructional intervention.

### 3.2. Statistical Analysis of the Pre-test, Post-test and Follow-up test GJCT

In order to find out whether the treatment had an effect on the performance of the two groups, we ran a mixed design ANOVA test on our data from the pre-test, post-test and follow-up test GJCT. Table 2 below presents the means for both groups on pre-, post- and follow-up test GJCT:

Table 2. Group statistics for pre-test, post-test and follow-up test GJCT

Groups	PRETEST			POSTTEST			FOLLOW-UP		
	N	Mean	Sd.	N	Mean	Sd.	N	Mean	Sd.
Experimental	20	31.60	2.68	20	37.35	2.03	20	37.70	2.06
Control	29	33.24	3.67	29	33.52	2.42	29	33.41	2.30

As seen in Table 2, there is a considerable increase in experimental group's mean score in the post-test but not in that of the control group. This result is meaningful in that it suggests that the instruction given to the experimental group made a difference on participants' performance. The mean score of experimental group increased slightly in the follow-up test as well while control group's mean score remained the same. This suggests that the effect of the instruction is durable. The result of the mixed design ANOVA test is presented in Table 3 below:

Table 3. Results of Mixed Design ANOVA Test for the GJCT

Source	Sum of Sq.	df	Mean Sq.	F	p
Between Subjects	607.782	48			
Group	165.553	1	165.553	17.595	.000
Error	442.229	47	9.409		
Within Subjects	1099.324	64.93			
Measure (pre-post-fo)	298.739	1.325	225.447	25.862	.000
Group*Measures	257.678	1.325	194.459	22.307	.000
Error	542.907	62.280	8.717		
Total	1707.106	112.93			

To begin with, there is a statistically significant difference between the total scores obtained from the pre-test, post-test and follow-up test of both groups ( $F(1, 47) = 17.595$   $p < 0.00$ ). This means that being in different groups had an

effect on the performances of the participants (group effect). Furthermore, it is also apparent in Table 3 that participants performed differently on the pre, post- and follow-tests, and this difference is statistically significant ( $F(1.325, 62.280) = 25.862$   $p < 0.00$ ) (measure effect). Lastly, our results reveal that the performance of both groups on the GJCT revealed a statistically significant difference ( $F(1.325, 62.280) = 22.307$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ) on post- and follow-up tests (group and measure effect). Since there was no statistically significant difference between the groups on the pre-test GJCT, this result can be attributed to the effect of the treatment.

### 3.3. Statistical Analysis of the Pre-test, Post-test and Follow-up PT

In order to find out whether the treatment had an effect on the performance of the two groups on Part B of the PT, we ran a mixed design ANOVA test on our data from the pre-, post- and follow-up tests. Table 4 presents the group statistics for pre-, post- and follow-up test Part B of the PT. As is obvious in the table, the mean scores of the participants in both groups slightly increased after the treatment.

Table 4. Group statistics for pre-test, post-test and follow-up test Part B of the PT

Groups	PRETEST			POSTTEST			FOLLOW-UP		
	N	Mean	Sd.	N	Mean	Sd.	N	Mean	Sd.
Experimental	20	9.35	1.04	20	9.55	.76	20	9.56	.83
Control	29	8.83	1.04	29	8.93	.96	29	8.92	.96

Table 5. Results of Mixed Design ANOVA Test for Part B of the PT

Source	Sum of Sq.	df	Mean Sq.	F	p
Between Subjects	69.946	48			
Group	12.227	1	12.227	9.956	
Error	57.719	47	1.228		.003
Within Subjects	69.394	65.784			
Measure (pre-post-fol)	.727	1.343	.541	.498	
Group*Measures	.074	1.343	.055	.050	.537
Error	68.593	63.098	1.087		.888
Total	135.73	113.784			

In Table 5, which presents the mixed design ANOVA results, we see that the difference between the correct and incorrect preferences of both groups on all tests is not statistically significant ( $F(1.343, 63.098) = .050$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). This means that being in different groups did not have an effect in increasing the scores of the participants on Part B of the post- and follow-up test PT.

In order to see if the preferences of the participants in both groups differed significantly on the post-test we ran a chi-square test on Part A of the post-test PT as well. The results of the chi-square test revealed that participants' preferences in Part A of the post-test PT have changed after the treatment. While their preferences in the pre-test could not be generalized, we can conclude that in the post-test participants preferred lexical causatives more often than periphrastic causatives.

### 3.4. Statistical Analysis of the Pre-test, Post-test and Follow-up TT

Table 6 presents the group statistics for pre-, post-, and follow-up test TT. As seen in the table, the mean scores of both groups are very close in pre-, post- and follow-up test TT.

Table 6. Group statistics for pre-test, post-test and follow-up test TT

Groups	PRETEST			POSTTEST			FOLLOW-UP		
	N	Mean	Sd.	N	Mean	Sd.	N	Mean	Sd.
Experimental	20	18.70	2.13	20	18.70	2.45	20	19.15	2.03
Control	29	18.93	1.25	29	18.97	1.32	29	18.94	1.31

A mixed design ANOVA test was run on the TT too in order to see if the performance of the groups differed after the treatment. Table 7 presents the results of this test:

Table 7. Results of Mixed Design ANOVA Test for TT

Source	Sum of Sq.	df	Mean Sq.	F	p
Between Subjects	222	48			
Group	.304	1	.304	.064	.801
Error	221.696	47	4.717		
Within Subjects	201.159	72.858			
Measure (pre-post-fo)	1.485	1.487	.999	.353	.640
Group*Measures	1.730	1.487	1.163	.411	.604
Error	197.944	69.884	2.832		
Total	423.159	120.858			

As seen in the table, there is not a statistically significant difference between the total scores obtained from the pre-, post- and follow-up test of both groups ( $F(1, 47) = .064$   $p > 0.05$ ) (group effect). Likewise, Table 7 also shows that the performance of both groups on the TT did not reveal a statistically significant difference ( $F(1.487, 69.884) = .353$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) (measure effect). This result indicates that being in different groups did not have an effect on increasing the scores of the participants on the TT. Lastly, the performance

of both groups on the TT did not reveal a statistically significant difference ( $F(1.487, 69.884) = .411, p > 0.05$ ) on post- and follow-up tests (group and measure effect). This result, evaluated with the GJCT results, is noteworthy. The GJCT, which is a judgment task, revealed a statistically significant difference whereas the TT, which is a production task, did not. Since CR activities aim to make the learners notice the target form and not necessarily produce it correctly in immediate contexts, this result is worth to note.

#### **4. Conclusions and Discussion**

The results of our data analysis suggest that explicit instruction does help to distinguish between grammatical and ungrammatical causative/inchoative transitivity alternations. As the primary premise of CR activities is to help the learners notice the target form, we can conclude that our participants started to recognize the causative/inchoative verbs in the post-test GJCT due to the instruction they were exposed to. When we look at the pre-test and post-test PT results, we see that there was no difference between the preferences of participants regarding the causative structures. However, this data should be analyzed cautiously. There were 10 items in the task and the mean scores of the groups were high for both groups even in the pre-test. That is to say, participants were already able to choose between grammatical and ungrammatical causative structures. This result contradicts with the GJCT results in this sense. However, this contrast might be due to difference between the numbers of items in both tasks. There was also no statistically significant difference between the performances of both groups in the pre- and post-test TT. Experimental group only showed a slight improvement in their translations in the follow-up TT but not in the post-test. We can conclude that explicit instruction did not help the learners in their production.

Overall, we can conclude that explicit instruction helped learners recognize grammatical and ungrammatical sentence pairs, but it did not help learners reproduce grammatical sentences involving causative structures. This result is not surprising when compared with Macaro and Masterman's (2006) study in which they found that while explicit instruction leads to gains in some aspects of grammar, it does not render any improvement in translations or free compositions.

The results of the post-test and follow-up test GJCT clearly demonstrate that the effect of explicit instruction is durable. Since there was no difference between the groups' performances in other tasks, we cannot reach the same conclusion for production tasks.

Our results demonstrate that while explicit instruction is helpful on recognition tasks, it does not result in gains in production tasks. The question here is, then, how can we make the learners internalize the rules they have learnt and apply them to different situations? Keeping in mind the multi-faceted nature of second language acquisition, the teachers should keep bringing different types of materials and techniques to their classrooms. Not all learners are academically capable of noticing patterns and rules in the target language simply by being explicitly instructed. Therefore, the teacher needs to use a variety of exercises in order to provide all the students a chance to notice the target grammar item.

In addition, corpora studies have shown that the use of corpora in the classroom may aid the learning process. As Bernardini (2004) suggests, corpora might be especially useful in resulting gains in translation exercises. By providing the learners with the errors they make, that is, through negative evidence, learners might become aware of their incorrect usages. The application of corpora to the language classroom (i.e. Data-Driven Learning, DDL) has recently gained interest among researchers in SLA. Today, DDL is actually seen as a new type of C-R (Hadley, 2002) because the learners seek answers to their questions analyzing a corpus where the input is made visible to the learner.

Although causative/inchoative transitivity alternations in English appear in language textbooks even at the elementary level, they are never taught to students explicitly as no reference is made to them in grammar books either. Therefore, another implication to be drawn from this study concerns the textbook writers. We suggest that textbooks should include tasks in which learner's attention is directed to the different uses of certain verbs, such as transitive and intransitive uses of verbs.

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