

Tapping the distinction between explicit and implicit knowledge: Methodological issues

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Second language acquisition research often involves the need to determine the degree of attainment in the target language, either with a view to establishing the effects of a pedagogic intervention or to gaining insights into the relationship between proficiency level and some other variable, such as the strategy use, anxiety or motivation. While in some cases it is sufficient to rely on quite general data, such as self-evaluations, course grades or scores on different types of examinations, experimental or quasi-experimental studies, particularly those focusing on the acquisition of grammar, call for the use of much more sensitive tools. Such measures should help researchers gain insights into the effects of the treatment not only in terms of explicit knowledge of a particular linguistic feature, which refers to the familiarity with relevant rules and the ability to apply them on traditional tests, but also implicit knowledge, which is reflective of subconscious or highly automatized knowledge and the ability to use the targeted linguistic feature in relatively spontaneous communication (DeKeyser, 2007; Ellis, 2007). However, there are major challenges involved in designing tasks tapping the two types of linguistic knowledge and a question arises about the extent to which the two types of representation can in fact be teased apart. The paper aims to discuss methodological issues in the measurement of explicit and implicit knowledge, evaluate options currently available to researchers as well as making suggestions with respect to how this task can best be attained in classroom-oriented research.