

Testing the Covert Method of Grammar Teaching: A Pilot Study

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For the last few years, I have been developing a method for teaching grammar to ESL/EFL students that I call “Covert Grammar.” The fundamental principle of Covert Grammar is that showing language learners the grammatical patterns of language rather than telling them about them allows students to become aware of forms and rules implicitly without the necessity of having to verbalize them. This approach can either by-pass or complement the development of explicit knowledge of L2 by directly developing students’ implicit knowledge (Ellis, 2001). Covert Grammar techniques include guided inductive learning in which students are purposefully led to discover grammar rules through the physical manipulation of color-coded grammar elements. It is believed that the cognitive effort of inductive learning integrates the memory for L2 grammar more deeply into students’ long-term memory, while the visual and tactile processing of information lays down additional memories for that information.

Covert Grammar adopts the focus on form techniques of input enhancement and input flood (White, 1998). Input enhancement is achieved by printing target structures in colored boxes in texts and worksheets. Input flood is provided in readings “seeded” with target structures, and by engaging students in the repeated oral and written processing of these structures. These techniques draw students’ attention to grammatical structures in context, allowing students to simultaneously focus on form and meaning.

The importance of output strongly emphasized in Covert Grammar. According to Focus on Form, the production of pushed output, i.e., output slightly above the level that students can produce on their own, and the subsequent negotiation for meaning, are the true sites of language acquisition. Producing output allows students to test their hypotheses, proceduralize their explicit knowledge, develop automaticity, and notice the holes in their L2 competence. The negative feedback received from negotiating for meaning helps them notice the gaps in their production, leading to the restructuring of their interlanguage system (DeKeyser, 1998; Swain, 1998). To implement these processes, Covert Grammar provides students with numerous opportunities to produce target forms in meaningful, communicative activities.

However, unlike Long’s (1991 in Long & Robinson, 1998) definition of Focus on Form as reactive, Covert Grammar uses preemptive intervention, whose a priori purpose is to teach a particular grammar point (Long & Robinson). Nevertheless, while it focuses on specific target structures, it promotes the

development of implicit knowledge more than explicit knowledge by avoiding technical metatalk with reduced grammatical terminology in non-technical metatalk (Williams, 2001).

In order to test the Covert Grammar Method, I arranged to team-teach an Intermediate Grammar/Writing course in the Intensive English Program (IEP) at my university. My aim was to try out various Covert Grammar activities to observe how students responded to them, and record students' perceptions of the method. The purpose was to evaluate the effectiveness of the method and reflect on ways to improve it. The following research questions were proposed in the study:

- 1) How do students respond to Covert Grammar techniques and activities?
- 2) How effective do the components of Covert Grammar seem to be?
- 3) How effective do students perceive Covert Grammar techniques and activities to be?

Methodology

The participants in this study were 11 students, 6 males and 5 females, who ranged from 18 to 23 years old. They had Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Spanish as their L1s. However, due to the lack of consistent attendance of six of the students, only 5 actually received the treatment.

Three types of qualitative data were collected. First, I wrote Field Notes after each session that recorded my perceptions regarding how successfully students completed activities, whether they seemed engaged and stayed on task, what types of questions they asked, and what problems occurred during the delivery of the curriculum. Students filled out a Likert-scale Survey rating the effectiveness of 10 components of Covert Grammar, and participated in an open-ended Interview.

Participants received Covert Grammar instruction for a one-hour class 2 days a week during 13 weeks, for a total of 26 hours. Each class consisted of two or more activities that focused on specific grammar points, including reading input enhanced texts, making personal statements; and interview, categorization, scrambled sentences, and paragraph writing activities. Some of the grammar points covered were the use of present progressive for activities currently taking place in one's life and near future, the use of the formal future for prediction, quantifiers of proportion, and expressions of possibility.

Results

An examination of my field notes revealed several themes. First of all, I observed the development of a classroom culture. At first, students seemed confused about how to perform activities, but after several sessions, they quickly adapted to classroom routines. This was reflected in behaviors such as how they knew when they could help each other with work, when they needed to find a partner for an interview, and how they waited for me to check their work before they glued it on worksheets. In addition, I observed them develop strategies for performing the categorization and sentence construction activities by lining up word and sentence pieces with the same colors and systematically “solving the puzzle” of the activity. As far as success is concerned, I noticed that participants generally seemed to enjoy activities and stayed on task, but that there were two specific instances in which tasks were too difficult and needed adjustment. One was a scrambled sentence activity in which there were too many pieces; another was an inductive activity in which students needed a few more clues to arrive at the rule.

Another theme that emerged from my perceptions was the implementation of implicit instruction vs. explicit instruction (Fotos, 2001). I had originally set out to deliver the curriculum with no explicit instruction by avoiding all metatalk about grammar to see if implicit instruction would be effective by itself. However, I soon found that metatalk could not be avoided since the participants were accustomed to learning grammar explicitly. As a result, I adopted the strategy of only delivering implicit instruction, but entertained them in the explicit discussion of grammar when students initiated questions or comments. Thus, any explicit instruction was student-directed, while the implicit instruction was teacher-directed.

In the Student Surveys, participants ranked the effectiveness of various components of Covert Grammar on a 7-point Likert Scale that ranged from “not effective” to “very effective.” Students’ mean scores for all techniques were favorable (i.e., above 4.5) and ranged from 5.0 to 6.2 (see Table 1). However, a few components received a rating of “3” from some students, indicating that they were only considered somewhat effective by these individuals.

Table 1: Results of Student Survey

Grammar Component	Rating	Grammar Component	Rating
Practicing Collocations	6.2	Assembling Sentence Pieces	5.4
Writing Paragraphs From Information on Worksheets	6.0	The Use of Color To Indicate Parts of Speech	5.4
Input Enhancement on Model Paragraphs	5.8	Writing Sentences About Yourself	5.2
Filling Out Sentence Patterns on Worksheets	5.6	Pictures	5.0
Interviewing Other Students	5.4	Gluing Sentence Pieces on Worksheets	5.0

The student interviews provided more detailed information about what aspects of Covert Grammar students found effective and why. Overall, students were enthusiastic about the method and said they would like to continue learning grammar this way. All students reported that they thought the best aspect of the method was the many opportunities that they had to practice using the grammar structures. Almost all students reported that they thought the use of color was very effective, and a couple commented that the color patterns helped them remember the rules. One student, however, was emphatic that the colors made no difference to her. Most students also thought that activities in which they manipulated word and sentence pieces were helpful. One student commented that while he found these activities interesting and useful, he had difficulty physically manipulating the pieces with his hands.

Discussion

The techniques and activities used in Covert Grammar appeared to be effective, as reflected in my observations and participants' perceptions. Students seemed interested and engaged in most of the activities, and their language development appeared to benefit from the treatment. This was supported by their ratings of the Covert Grammar components in the student survey, and their comments in the student interviews. Thus, it is believed that Covert Grammar combines many sound strategies that promote second language acquisition.

The aspect of the method that students mentioned most as being effective was the high proportion of class time spent on practicing the grammar structures rather than "talking about them." This response shows that these students instinctively agree with the output hypothesis (Swain, 1998), according to

which comprehensible input is not sufficient to cause language acquisition, as proposed by Krashen (1982). Rather, learners need to produce pushed output, which stretches their L2 interlanguage abilities and allows them to restructure their L2 interlanguage systems to become more native-like. Students' consensus about the effectiveness of practice is also consistent with Anderson's skill acquisition model adopted by some focus on form advocates (e.g., De Keyser, 1998), in which learners acquire information by proceduralizing explicit knowledge through repeated practice until it becomes implicit knowledge.

The use of color was also cited by most students as being effective. It appears that the combination of the color-coding of grammar forms that repeated throughout the materials typed in boxes created an effective type of input enhancement and input flood that allowed students to notice the forms and rules of the target grammar structures. This is corroborated by the fact that some students commented in the interview that the colors helped them remember the sentence patterns. According to the noticing hypothesis (Swain, 1998), attention to form is not sufficient for input to become intake. Instead, it requires awareness through noticing, the conscious registering of forms and the rules applied to them.

The original notion of presenting the grammar completely implicitly was not found to be effective or practical for these academically-oriented adult learners, who were accustomed to studying grammar explicitly, and had the cognitive and linguistic capacity to understand grammatical explanations. Nevertheless, they also responded to the implicit instruction of grammar, as demonstrated by the fact that many activities did not involve student-initiated metatalk. This is supported by the Interface Hypothesis, which claims that learners can store both explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge about the same grammar information, that they complement each other, and that one can be transformed into the other, in contrast with Krashen's (1982) non-interface position (DeKeyser, 1998). Therefore, it is believed that the implicit instruction in Covert Grammar had an additive effect on students' learning in that it allowed them to develop both their implicit and explicit knowledge of the target language at the same time.

Finally, this study demonstrates the potential of Covert Grammar as an effective ESL/EFL method because it provides interactive activities that allow students to simultaneously process form and meaning,

and addresses the development of their implicit knowledge. However, it also showed that the procedures of particular activities need to be re-evaluated, and that addressing the development of students' explicit knowledge cannot be ignored.

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