



The Availability of Conscious Knowledge: A Comment on Lindseth (2016)

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Abstract: *Lindseth (2016) reported that direct instruction and practice using the German verb-inversion rule resulted in higher accuracy in an oral test for college students, supporting the hypothesis that explicit linguistic knowledge can become implicit linguistic knowledge. It is quite likely, however, that the conditions for the use of conscious knowledge (the monitor) were met on the test.*

Key words: *conscious learning, explicit learning, focus on form, grammar, monitor*

Lindseth (2016) studied the impact of direct teaching on college-level students who had studied German for three semesters and were participating in a semester-abroad program. Lindseth claimed that intensive training in the subject-verb inversion rule in German resulted in superior performance on an oral test that, she maintained, did not allow monitoring using consciously learned rules. She concluded that explicit knowledge (conscious learning) became implicit knowledge (subconscious, or acquired competence).

It is not clear that this is what happened: It can be argued that the conditions necessary for the retrieval and application of conscious knowledge were met on the oral test.

Krashen (1982) hypothesized that second language performers can access and apply conscious knowledge when three conditions are met: (1) consciously knowing the rule, (2) thinking about correctness, and (3) having time to apply the rule. This hypothesis is consistent with the results of a number of studies of the effects of conscious learning (Krashen, 1999, 2003).

Condition (1) was obviously met for Lindseth's subjects. She noted that her subjects, college-age students of German as a foreign language, "clearly have conscious knowledge" of the subject-verb inversion rule in German, an observation confirmed by the finding that her subjects were able to use the subject-verb inversion rule correctly about 75% of the time in their writing, compared to about 30% in oral communication.

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Condition (2) was met: Lindseth's experimental subjects had five 20-minute intensive sessions dedicated exclusively to reviewing the target rule and using it in both comprehension and production. Students participated in these sessions during the last 5 weeks of a semester-long study abroad program and were tested at the end of the semester. It should also be noted that the test, the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview, is clearly a test. It is not genuine communication. Language tests obviously encourage a focus on form. After getting intensive instruction on subject-verb inversion, it is quite likely that the experimental subjects felt that accuracy in this rule was a high priority.

Lindseth assumed that Condition (3) was not met in the oral test given at the end of the semester; that students did not have time to access and apply conscious knowledge. It is, however, quite plausible that the experimental students had enough time to access and apply the subject-verb rule, which is straightforward and was already well learned by most of the students even before the five 20-minute sessions.

What this study may be showing language educators is that conscious monitoring is possible when older learners who are used to direct instruction and conscious learning focus on only a few rules and not the entire grammatical system. It is also more likely with straightforward, well-learned rules and when speakers are intensively focused on form. In this case, the focus was due to the five training sessions and the obvious testing situation.

In other words, there is enough time to use consciously learned rules in oral situations in which speakers are used to conscious learning, there is clear focus on form, the rule is well learned, only one

rule is involved, and the rule is fresh in one's mind.

Rather than entertain the possibility that monitoring was possible, Lindseth assumed the correctness of the hypothesis that explicitly learned rules can become implicit, or that "learning" can become "acquisition." She did not discuss the arguments against this hypothesis (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 2003). (Lindseth described the case of one "very motivated" student who told Lindseth that she could use the subject-verb rule correctly when reminded of it, but reverted to incorrect word order in casual conversation only a few minutes later. The conversation was not, however, a test situation.)

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