The role of explicit knowledge in written L2 production

This study examines how explicit knowledge is used in L2 production, its relation to language acquisition, as well as potential implications of its use in language teaching. The study focuses on the written production of a specific type of L2 learners – adult native speakers of Serbian who learn Swedish as a foreign language (outside of Sweden) and who possess extensive explicit knowledge. Their use of various aspects of Swedish word order is analysed in four phases (after one, two, three and four years of studying Swedish) based on the criteria of correctness and intensity of use, both relative (through different stages of the internal progression) and absolute (compared to L1 use, when possible). Besides describing the progression in the use of various aspects of word order, one of the goals is to identify if the use stabilizes and reaches near-native levels, and if so in which phase. Particular focus is placed on the learners’ self-corrections (including hypercorrections) and what they can tell us about how learners monitor their own production.

The results show that the use of certain aspects of word order does reach stabilization points on group level; some stabilize after one year, some after three, while some do not show any signs of stabilization even after four years. One particularly interesting finding is that the described progression is very similar to progression in acquiring Swedish word order on implicit level. This seems to corroborate claims that explicit knowledge does not change the process of acquisition qualitatively. Furthermore, the analysis of self-corrections shows that the use of explicit knowledge depends primarily on the grammatical complexity and salience (both linguistic and metalinguistic) of certain syntactic contexts, not their syntactic relevance. One possible explanation for the observed progression is that implicit and explicit knowledge develop in parallel, but not entirely independently of each other.