

Grammar instruction and processing instruction

Alessandro Benati
University of Greenwich, UK

This paper will review the four main positions around the role of grammar instruction which have emerged from studies conducted to investigate the effects of formal instruction in second language acquisition (Van Patten and Benati, 2010). A solid review of the literature on instructional effects would lead the reader to conclude that learners bring to the task of acquisition a variety of internal mechanisms and traits which effectively override most instructional efforts. However, the more researchers learn about what learners do with input and how they do it, the closer they come to understanding the possibilities of instructional effects. To this end, the question about the role of instruction has begun to shift in research in the last forty years. When the debate on the role of instruction first surfaced in the late 1970s and early 1980s, instruction consisted largely of grammar-only types of activities such as mechanical drills, fill-in-the-blank, and various other form-only exercises. Meaning and input were clearly excluded (Lee and Van Patten, 2003). Since the 1990s, however, researchers began to seriously examine the issue of how learners interact with input asking questions such as “why do they skip over some things in the input?” and “what makes some features harder to process than others?” (Van Patten, 2005). Such questions drove researchers to examine the effects not of instruction more generally but of particular kinds of instructional interventions; those that were both input oriented and meaning-based. These interventions include such things as text enhancement, input flood and in particular processing instruction (Wong, 2005). The paper will track the impact processing instruction has made since its conception (Lee and Benati, 2009). It will explain processing instruction, both its main theoretical underpinnings as well as the guidelines for developing structured input practices. It will also provide an overview of the empirical research conducted to date, on processing instruction and it will reflect on the new research trends on measuring the relative effects of this instructional approach to grammar instruction (Benati and Lee, 2008, 2010).