

'Were they taught or did they learn?' – The role and effects of instruction in Second Language Learning

Alex Housen
Vrije University Brussels

Instruction has always been a key component of the second/foreign language learning experience of most learners but its role in the acquisition of a second/foreign language (L2) has been controversial ever since antiquity. Throughout the years language teachers have often wondered about the apparent discrepancy between what their students are taught, what they learn and (seem to) know, and what they can actually do in their L2. But whatever their allegiance to or preference for a particular teaching method, all language teachers will probably agree that some kind of instruction is necessary, or at least beneficial, for successful L2 learning. The research community, however, is more divided. On the one hand there are researchers who believe that second language acquisition (SLA) is essentially an intuitive process guided by innate mechanisms which cannot be influenced by pedagogical intervention. On the other hand there are those who believe that instruction is effective in its own right, that it can make a difference in how (well) learners learn an L2, and that in some cases instruction will even be necessary for successful SLA. Fuelled by this debate, the past two decades have seen an explosion of research on the role and the effects of instruction in L2 learning and an abundance of mixed, sometimes even contradictory findings. The aim of this presentation is provide a general background for this GALA workshop and to propose a taxonomic framework that identifies major dimensions along which the roles and effects of instruction on L2 learning can be fruitfully considered, and to synthesize general research findings in terms of this framework. This framework considers both (a) the nature of the role(s) and effect(s) of instruction on L2 learning (part 1) and (b) the factors that moderate these effects and, hence, the effectiveness of instruction for L2 learning and teaching (part 2). In the first part I will thus argue that the variegated roles and effects of instruction should be envisaged in terms of (1) the different *components* of the SLA process, (2) the different *dimensions* of the SLA process, (3) the cognitive *mechanisms* of SLA, (4) the different types of L2 knowledge that L2 learners develop, and (5) the major *dimensions* of L2 performance and L2 proficiency. In a second part I will argue that whatever the exact nature of the effects that instruction may have on the L2 learning process, these effects will be moderated by *at least* the following factors, pertaining to the *how*, the *what* and the *who* of L2 instruction: (1) the type of learner, (2) the type of instruction, and (3) the type of L2 feature targeted by the instruction. Each of the components of this framework will be discussed in turn and illustrated with findings from key studies.