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Learning More Than One Language Across the Lifespan

Recent Developments in Second Language Instruction: A Literature Review on Explicit Phonetic Instruction and Collaborative Writing

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Recent years have witnessed dramatic change in the area of second language teaching and a growing demand for effective language programs (Burns and Richards 2012). Second language teachers face many challenges, and their effectiveness is related to their knowledge base (Head and Taylor 1997). Although teachers often explicitly teach certain aspects of the second language (L2), such as grammar rules and vocabulary, they tend to provide only incidental instruction when teaching speaking and writing, both critical aspects of effective communication in the L2 (Hirvela 1999; Sturm 2019). Without explanations and directed attention, students develop their own hypotheses about how language works (Ellis 2015).

This article attempts to connect classroom second language teachers and researchers in applied linguistics by directly responding to two questions posed by teachers in a public school district:

- What is the role of explicit phonetic instruction in speech perception and production?
- What is the effect of L2 collaborative writing?

These questions both relate to instruction in language output, which is a critical aspect of language learning.

To answer these questions, we enrolled in a language pedagogy course and reviewed relevant

literature published between 2010 and 2020, with the aim of helping second language teachers evaluate their assumptions and improve their instruction in speaking and writing. Studies have demonstrated the significance of instruction in language output, since attempting to produce spoken and written output can help learners concentrate on what they do not know or what they know imperfectly (Lantolf 2000).

This literature review summarizes recent research on the two output teaching methods—explicit phonetic instruction and L2 collaborative writing. At the end of each section, we present classroom implications to provide teachers with practical suggestions to use in their teaching.

Explicit Phonetic Instruction in Speech Perception and Production

Developing intelligible and comprehensible speech (that is, speech that can be understood by listeners) is crucial for second language learners (Derwing 2008). Even when their proficiency is high, they may still find improving or modifying their pronunciation challenging (Gordon and Darcy 2016).

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In the classroom, teachers also face challenges in incorporating pronunciation instruction into their language courses. Class time is limited, relatively few materials exist for teaching pronunciation, and students may have various pronunciation problems (Foote, Holtby and Derwing 2011).

Explicit phonetic instruction—teaching phonetics explicitly, with rule explanation in the process of instruction (Spada and Tomita 2010)—can include instruction in the segmental and the suprasegmental features of pronunciation. The segmental features are aspects of speech sounds (that is, vowels and consonants), including how sounds are distinguished from one another and how they are produced in the mouth. The suprasegmental features, also known as prosodic features, include stress, tone, rhythm and intonation (Fox 2000).

Given the close relationship between speech perception and speech production, this section of the literature review focuses on the research question, What is the role of explicit phonetic instruction in speech perception and production? It summarizes relevant studies on explicit phonetic instruction published between 2010 and 2020. Table 1 (in the appendix) summarizes the research.

Explicit Phonetic Instruction in Speech Perception

Explicit phonetic instruction focuses on teaching the segmental or suprasegmental features of pronunciation explicitly, with rule explanation.

In Kissling's (2015) study of Spanish as a foreign language students, the experimental group, who received explicit instruction in the segmental features of Spanish, took part in online training on eight target segments, including an explanation of letter–sound correspondences, information about how to produce the sounds, and details on the differences in the articulation of Spanish and English segments. The control group completed only an online training that involved watching video vignettes in which Spanish speakers talked about various topics while using the target sounds. The students were given discrimination tests before the instruction, immediately after the instruction and three weeks after the instruction. The results indicated that the participants who had been given explicit instruction gained an advantage in discriminating Spanish segments and their English

counterparts, although the advantage was small. Moreover, the delayed effects were stronger than the immediate effects.

In their study of Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, Khaghaninejad and Maleki (2015) not only investigated explicit instruction in segmental features but also compared the roles of segmental and suprasegmental instruction in listening comprehension. Their findings demonstrated that the participants who had received instruction in segmental features had significantly higher scores in the post-test than those who had focused on suprasegmental features.

Derwing et al (2012), while not directly exploring explicit phonetic instruction, investigated five common problems in listening perception to determine which aspects of listening perception could be improved without explicit phonetic instruction. As part of a longitudinal study of adult learners of English as a second language (ESL), participants completed the same listening test five times in 10 months. The final results revealed that the participants' perceptions of sentence stress, intonation and the *-teen/-ty* distinction (in numbers) had improved significantly without explicit instruction, whereas their perceptions of word stress and the *can/can't* distinction did not show a significant change over time.

Previous studies have indicated the positive role of explicit phonetic instruction in second language learners' development of speech perception. Although some aspects of speech perception (such as sentence stress and intonation) do not require explicit phonetic instruction, other aspects may improve significantly only with explicit phonetic instruction.

Explicit Phonetic Instruction in Speech Production

Explicit phonetic instruction may also help second language learners improve the comprehensibility of their speech in the L2.

Gordon and Darcy (2016, 57) define *comprehensibility* as “a listener's estimation of difficulty in understanding an utterance.” In their study of undergraduate ESL students of various first language (L1) backgrounds, they examined the roles of explicit phonetic instruction (in segmental and suprasegmental features) and of implicit instruction in speech comprehensibility over a short period of intervention. In the results, only the experimental

group that had received explicit instruction in suprasegmental features showed significant improvement in comprehensibility. The group that had received instruction in segmental features, however, had worse performance in terms of comprehensibility. A possible explanation is that those speakers paid too much attention to the segments and, therefore, had fewer attentional resources for complexity and fluency of speech.

Saito (2011) also explored the relationship between explicit phonetic instruction in segmental features and pronunciation development in the L2 in native Japanese speakers learning ESL. Two outcome measures—accentedness and comprehensibility—were adopted to evaluate the differences between the experimental group (with explicit instruction) and the control group (without instruction) in the pre-test and the post-test. The findings showed no significant difference in accentedness across the two groups, but in the post-test the experimental group performed significantly better in terms of comprehensibility.

Even over a short time, explicit instruction in suprasegmental features may help learners improve their speech comprehensibility. Although scholars disagree about the effectiveness of explicit instruction in segmental features, findings nevertheless indicate that combining segmental and suprasegmental instruction is beneficial.

Classroom Implications

This review of the literature demonstrates the positive role of explicit phonetic instruction in segmental and suprasegmental features in learners' development in the L2. Explicit instruction, especially in segmental features, may help learners improve their speech perception (Khaghaninejad and Maleki 2015; Kissling 2015), and explicit instruction in suprasegmental features may contribute to the comprehensibility of learners' speech in the L2 (Saito 2011). Although explicit phonetic instruction in segmental features can help learners reduce their pronunciation errors, scholars continue to debate whether it can help learners improve the comprehensibility of their speech (Gordon and Darcy 2016).

These studies on explicit phonetic instruction demonstrate that in teaching speech perception and production in the L2, teachers cannot completely rely on incidental instruction (Saito 2011). They

must devote time to explaining and presenting aspects of speech sounds and prosodic features. In general, teachers should provide explicit phonetic instruction to second language learners to improve their speech perception and production. Teachers can combine explicit instruction in segmental and suprasegmental features and use various teaching strategies, such as explaining letter–sound correspondences, providing information about how to produce different sounds, and analyzing words and phrases.

The Effect of L2 Collaborative Writing

As with the development of speech perception and production, the teacher's role should be emphasized in second language writing. Teachers can play a central role in students' writing development by encouraging L2 collaborative writing (Dobao 2012; Dobao and Blum 2013).

Informed by sociocultural theory, second language learning can be seen as a social process in which students engage in languaging and scaffolding (Swain, Kinnear and Steinman 2011). Languaging is the process of using language to make meaning and to construct knowledge and experience, and scaffolding is the support given to learners, without which they may not achieve. Vygotsky (1978) believed that knowledge can be co-constructed during pair and group work, as students draw on their knowledge to solve problems together.

Over the past two decades, researchers have been interested in learner collaboration during second language learning, and studies have demonstrated the benefits of collaboration in the L2. In L2 collaborative writing, students work in pairs or groups to write a text together in the L2 (Shehadeh 2011).

The research question guiding this section of the literature review is, What is the effect of L2 collaborative writing? The studies reviewed were published in peer-reviewed journals in linguistics and language studies between 2010 and 2020. In general, the studies provide empirical evidence that L2 collaborative writing is an effective in-class writing tool, as it is beneficial for both L2 writing outcomes and learner attitudes. Table 2 (in the appendix) summarizes the research.

The Effect of L2 Collaborative Writing on Writing Outcomes

Studies have shown that L2 collaborative writing may improve writing outcomes in various ways.

Shehadeh (2011) conducted a mixed methods study of low-English-proficiency students at a large university in the United Arab Emirates to explore how L2 collaborative writing affects written outcomes after a prolonged period of practice. The findings indicated that writing collaboratively had a significant effect on improving students' written content, organization and vocabulary, but its effect on grammar and mechanics was negligible.

Dobao's (2012) study of intermediate-level Spanish as a foreign language students in the United States compared the effects of group, pair and individual work on the performance of the same writing task. The results showed that the collaboratively written texts were more accurate than the individually produced texts. Moreover, the type of collaboration form also affected writing outcomes. Small groups of students wrote more error-free sentences than did pairs of students, and more language-related episodes were found in small groups than in pairs, which led to more successful solutions to language problems.

The writing outcomes from pairs assigned by teachers might also be different from the outcomes of pairs selected by students. Mozaffari's (2017) study of intermediate-level EFL students in Iran examined the effects of both teacher-assigned writing pairs and student-selected writing pairs on the content of writing discussion, the types of dyadic interaction and the writing outcomes. The results indicated that the student-selected pairs had more off-task behaviours during writing discussions, while the teacher-assigned pairs had more discussion on language use. Also, the teacher-assigned pairs produced writing that was significantly more fluent and accurate and demonstrated superior organization, grammar and vocabulary.

Other researchers have examined the effects of social technologies and use of the L1 in L2 collaborative writing. Hsu and Lo (2018), in their study of EFL learners at a university in Taiwan, found that wiki-mediated collaborative writing significantly

improved students' writing in terms of content quality and linguistic accuracy but had no evident effect on organization and linguistic complexity.

Zhang (2018), who may have been the first researcher to examine the effects of L1 use on collaborative writing, studied Chinese intermediate-level EFL students and found that the written texts produced by groups who interacted in the L1 were more complex in terms of the mean length of clauses and also contained more error-free clauses. Nonetheless, no differences were found in fluency and text quality between texts produced by the groups who interacted in the L1 and the groups who interacted in the L2.

The Effect of L2 Collaborative Writing on Learner Attitudes

Studies have found that learners generally have positive attitudes toward and perceptions of collaborative writing in second language learning and that they believe that collaborate writing enhances their learning in various ways.

Shehadeh (2011) surveyed EFL students in the United Arab Emirates who had completed a written task in pairs to uncover how they viewed collaborative writing. Most participants had a positive view of the task and found it rewarding. They claimed that the collaborative writing experience had enhanced their confidence in their writing ability and improved their language skills. Also, they said that collaborative writing allowed them to create, analyze, discuss and plan ideas jointly, which enabled them to write better texts in pairs than they did individually.

In addition to investigating learners' attitudes toward L2 collaborative writing as opposed to individual writing, researchers have explored their attitudes toward pair writing and group writing. In their study of intermediate learners of Spanish as a foreign language at a university in the United States, Dobao and Blum (2013) looked at students' attitudes toward writing in pairs or in small groups, as well as their perceptions of collaborative writing. They put 36 female and 19 male students into pairs or groups of four to complete a collaborative writing task and a post-task questionnaire. The responses showed that the vast majority of students had a more-positive attitude toward collaborative writing than toward individual writing. Most participants

said that collaborative writing helped improve their grammatical and lexical accuracy. Interestingly, the students working in pairs held more-favourable perceptions of pair collaboration, while those working in small groups held more-favourable perceptions of small-group collaboration.

Classroom Implications

In general, the studies reviewed provide empirical evidence that L2 collaborative writing is an effective in-class writing tool.

Second language teachers should include both small-group writing tasks and pair writing tasks in class, since both types of collaboration appear to produce more-accurate writing than individual students do on their own. They could also use wiki-mediated collaborative writing to supplement their teaching of second language writing. Teachers should assign pairs carefully, considering the potential distractions that arise when friends work together. Finally, teachers should allow students to use the L1 in classroom pair discussions as it appears to help them produce more-complex texts.

Conclusion

This literature review has explored recent literature on the role of explicit phonetic instruction and the effect of L2 collaborative writing in second language learning.

The research indicates that explicit phonetic instruction, especially in segmental features, may help learners develop their listening ability and reduce their pronunciation errors, while instruction in suprasegmental features may increase learners' speech comprehensibility.

Studies also demonstrate the positive effects of L2 collaborative writing on written content, organization, vocabulary and text accuracy. Learners seem to prefer collaborative writing to individual writing because they believe that collaborative writing enhances their creativity and accuracy.

The literature also indicates directions for future research on explicit phonetic instruction and L2 collaborative writing.

Although scholars agree that second language teachers should use explicit instruction in both segmental features and suprasegmental features, they disagree about whether instruction in segmental features can help students improve their speech comprehensibility (Gordon and Darcy 2016). Thus, future studies should focus on the role of segmental features in speech comprehensibility in order to provide strong support for their instruction. Future studies on explicit phonetic instruction should combine segmental features and suprasegmental features and also extend the scope of participants, allowing people of various L1 and L2 backgrounds to be involved. The degree of phonetic difference between the L1 and the L2 might influence the role of explicit instruction.

As for directions for future research on L2 collaborative writing, researchers could investigate writing collaboration among second language students at the beginner or advanced level, since most existing studies have focused on intermediate-level students. The effect of interaction patterns between learners on writing results should also be examined (Hsu and Lo 2018). Shehadeh (2011) suggests that research on L2 collaborative writing could be extended to the field of EFL writing. Based on this suggestion, it would be meaningful for L2 collaborative writing to be used in classrooms of second languages other than English.

Appendix: Tables Summarizing the Research

TABLE 1. Explicit Phonetic Instruction in Speech Perception and Production

Author(s)	Participants	Goal of the study	Key findings
Derwing et al (2012)	Adult Mandarin ($n = 20$) and Slavic ($n = 20$) speakers who were beginner-level ESL learners	To investigate which aspects of listening perception could be improved without explicit phonetic instruction	Participants' perceptions of sentence stress, intonation and the <i>-teen/-ty</i> distinction (in numbers) improved significantly without explicit instruction, whereas their perceptions of word stress and the <i>can/can't</i> distinction did not show a significant change over time.
Gordon and Darcy (2016)	Undergraduate high-intermediate ESL learners of a variety of L1 backgrounds	To investigate the roles of explicit phonetic instruction (in segmental and suprasegmental features) and of implicit instruction in speech comprehensibility over a short period of intervention	Participants who received suprasegmental instruction demonstrated significant improvement in speech comprehensibility, but those who received segmental instruction had worse performance in comprehensibility.
Khaghaninejad and Maleki (2015)	Intermediate-level EFL learners ($n = 57$) in Iran, with ages ranging from 15 to 19	To investigate two types of explicit phonetic instruction—instruction in segmental and suprasegmental features—and their roles in listening comprehension	Participants who received explicit phonetic instruction performed significantly better on a listening test than those who did not receive explicit instruction. Those who received instruction focused on segmental features had significantly higher scores on the listening test than those who received instruction focused on suprasegmental features.
Kissling (2015)	Native English speakers ($n = 95$) studying Spanish as a foreign language, with beginning, intermediate and advanced proficiency levels	To explore the relationship between explicit phonetic instruction (in segmental features) or implicit instruction and learners' perception of L2 sounds	Participants who received explicit phonetic instruction in segmental features gained a small advantage in discriminating Spanish segments and their English counterparts.
Saito (2011)	Native Japanese speakers ($n = 20$) learning ESL at the university level	To examine the role of explicit phonetic instruction (in segmental features) in L2 pronunciation development	There was no significant difference in accentedness between the participants with explicit instruction in segmental features and those without instruction, but the participants with explicit instruction performed significantly better in terms of comprehensibility.

TABLE 2. The Effects of L2 Collaborative Writing

Author(s)	Participants	Goal of the study	Key findings
Dobao (2012)	Intermediate-level students learning Spanish at a university in the United States ($n = 111$)	To compare the effects of group, pair and individual work on the performance of the same writing task	The collaboratively written texts were more accurate than the individually produced texts. Also, small groups wrote more error-free sentences than did pairs. More language-related episodes were found in small groups than in pairs, which led to more successful solutions to language problems.
Dobao and Blum (2013)	Female ($n = 36$) and male ($n = 19$) intermediate learners of Spanish as a foreign language at a university in the United States	To examine how learners' attitudes toward and perceptions of L2 collaborative writing differ when working in pairs or in small groups	The vast majority of the students had more-positive attitudes toward collaborative writing than toward individual writing. Those who worked in pairs held more-favourable perceptions of pair collaboration, while those who worked in small groups held more-favourable perceptions of small-group collaboration.
Hsu and Lo (2018)	EFL learners at a Taiwanese university ($n = 52$)	To investigate how wiki-mediated collaboration can improve individual L2 writing performance	Wiki-mediated collaborative writing significantly improved students' writing in terms of content quality and linguistic accuracy, but it had no evident effect on organization and linguistic complexity.
Mozaffari (2017)	Intermediate-level EFL college students in Iran ($n = 40$)	To examine the impact of teacher-assigned writing pairs and student-selected writing pairs on the content of writing discussion, the types of dyadic interaction and writing outcomes	The student-selected pairs had more off-task behaviours during writing discussions, while the teacher-assigned pairs had more discussions about language use. Also, the teacher-assigned pairs produced writing that was significantly more fluent and accurate and also outperformed the student-selected pairs in terms of organization, grammar and vocabulary.
Shehadeh (2011)	Low-English-proficiency students at a large university in the United Arab Emirates ($n = 38$)	To explore how L2 collaborative writing affects written outcomes and how students perceive collaborative writing after a prolonged period of practice	Collaborative writing in the L2 had a significant impact on improving students' written content, organization and vocabulary but a negligible effect on grammar and mechanics. After prolonged practice, most students had a positive view of collaborative writing.
Zhang (2018)	Chinese college students who were intermediate EFL learners ($n = 70$)	To investigate the impact of L1 and L2 use on collaborative writing in the L2	The written texts produced by groups interacting in the L1 were more complex in terms of mean length of clauses and also contained more error-free clauses. No effect was found on fluency and text quality.

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Purpose and Goals of SLIC

The Second Languages and Intercultural Council aims to fulfill the following objectives:

- To enable Alberta teachers to become more aware of the issues of culture and second languages
- To enhance the knowledge, skills and understanding of teachers in the areas of second languages and culture studies through both inservice and preservice education
- To disseminate information about existing practices, programs and resources in second languages and intercultural education
- To encourage research that will result in the development and dissemination of innovative practices, programs and resources in second languages and intercultural education
- To provide advice and expertise to the Alberta Teachers' Association on learning and working conditions, curricula and teacher preparation as related to second languages and intercultural education
- To act through the Alberta Teachers' Association as an advocate for the enhancement and promotion of second languages and intercultural education

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