The role of explicit instruction in the acquisition of the present perfect

O papel da instrução explícita na aquisição do presente perfect

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims at analyzing the role of explicit instruction in the learning of the Present Perfect by Brazilian university students in a formal setting. Participants were divided into two groups and tested twice in comprehension and production tasks during a three-week interval. In the second week, the experimental group was exposed to explicit instruction on use and form of the target topic. Results indicate that the explicit instruction group showed overall improvement, providing support to the claim that explicit instruction is beneficial, or at least it is not prejudicial, to foreign language learning.

KEY WORDS: explicit instruction, grammar teaching, Present Perfect Tense.

RESUMO: O presente trabalho tem por objetivo analisar o papel da instrução explícita no aprendizado do *Present Perfect* por aprendizes universitários brasileiros em um contexto formal. Os participantes foram divididos em dois grupos e foram testados em sua compreensão e produção da estrutura duas vezes em um intervalo de três semanas. Na segunda semana, os participantes do grupo experimental foram expostos à instrução explícita sobre uso e forma do *Present Perfect Tense*. Os resultados indicam que os participantes do grupo que recebeu instrução obtiveram escores mais altos nos testes, corroborando a ideia de que a instrução explícita é benéfica, ou pelo menos não é prejudicial, ao aprendizado da língua estrangeira.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: instrução explícita, ensino de gramática, Present Perfect Tense.

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Introduction

It is not at all a novelty to say that English has become prominent as a *Lingua Franca*, neither it is to mention that its market demand has increased considerably throughout the years all around the world, as well as in Brazil. Nevertheless, it is sensible for language professionals, and students alike, to worry over the implications this augmented demand may have on the quality of its teaching.

There is no definitive explanation or theory of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), nor a methodological consensus, as can be noticed from the ever-changing state of English Language Teaching (ELT) theory. What we can easily find, though, is empirical and scientific evidence of principles and practices which have proven to actively affect the outcome of students' learning performance. With that in mind, this study does not aim at discussing teaching methodologies but one recurring element, and its impact on learning, in all of the field's lore: grammar instruction.

In this context, the investigation reported in this article aimed at verifying the extent to which explicit instruction might affect students' short-term comprehension and production of the Present Perfect tense in a classroom setting. Therefore, two groups of Brazilian university students taking their first level of English were tested for comprehension and production in a 3-week interval. Besides data collection, one of the groups was also exposed to instruction on the target topic before the second testing.

The article is organized as follows. Firstly, a few theoretical standpoints which consistently lay foundation to this study will be discussed. After that, we will present the objectives and hypotheses that guided the investigation, describe participants, tasks and materials that were used as well as the procedures adopted for data collection. Finally, results will be described and discussed and some final considerations will be presented.

Theoretical framework

Types of knowledge

Among the many unanswered questions on how second or foreign languages are best learned, the roles of implicit and explicit kinds of knowledge and the possibility of interface between them are issues that have received considerable attention in SLA studies in the past 30 years. These concepts were first discussed by Stephen Krashen (1981), in his Acquisition X Learning

Hypothesis, even though the terminology currently in use was only introduced much later (PARADIS, 1994).

Explicit knowledge is normally viewed as cognitively distinct from implicit knowledge, which means to assume that they involve different processing mechanisms. Segalowitz (2003) and Segalowitz and Hulstijn (2005), for instance, define implicit knowledge as the result of an automatic process, in contrast to explicit knowledge, which is the result of an effortful process. According to R. Ellis (2004), explicit knowledge can be broadly defined as "the conscious awareness of what a language or language in general consists of and / or the roles that it plays in human life (p. 229). He also points out that explicit knowledge is "typically accessed through controlled processing" (p. 245). In this context, a quick inspection of the literature in the field reveals that the main factor that seems to distinguish the definitions of explicit and implicit L2 knowledge is awareness.

The extent to which explicit knowledge is somehow related to implicit knowledge has been the focus of a lot of discussion within the SLA. There are three major positions regarding the possibility of interface between these two forms of knowledge. Krashen (1981) initiated the discussion by stating that learned knowledge does not convert into acquired knowledge, or, as current terminology allows, that explicit knowledge would never transform into / entail implicit knowledge of the language. According to the author, learned knowledge and acquired knowledge are stored in different parts of the brain and involve mental processes of different natures, thus being separate and incommunicable. A more modern version of this dichotomy is sponsored by Paradis (2009), who also claims that "explicit knowledge and implicit competence do not share information; they do not exchange data; they do not interact" (p. 64).

In complete opposition to such No Interface position is Robert DeKeyser's Strong Interface claim that L2 knowledge will only become procedural after communicative practice of initially declarative knowledge; in other words, learning could not only change into but would be essential to L2 acquisition. A more consensually accepted view on the matter, and the one by which this study will be guided, is the Weak Interface Hypothesis, espoused by Rod Ellis (2003; 2004; 2005), among others, wherein explicit knowledge is seem as a facilitator of implicit knowledge acquisition through the processes of "noticing", "noticing the gap" and guided output practice. Within this perspective, explicit knowledge can be internalized as implicit knowledge

provided that appropriate noticing of the differences between first and target language takes place.

It is also widely known that children's L1 acquisition will take place naturally as they engage socially in meaningful communication and by doing so they automatically extract the necessary linguistic evidence to acquire complex knowledge of language structures, despite the fact that they cannot actually describe this knowledge, as seen in the famous *Wug* study (BERKO, 1958).[1]

On the other hand, simple interaction may not suffice for L2 acquisition, among many other factors, due to L1 interference. It is reasonable to expect L2 learners to perceive a foreign language through their L1 – trying to shape it to their previous understanding of languages and communication, namely their mother tongue. Not surprisingly, levels of proficiency vary considerably among L2 learners. One might argue that this is due to the fact that input and attention to language are largely affected by individual characteristics and habits, not to mention motivation and cultural background. These different experiences with L2 seem to explain why people who live in L2-speaking countries will sometimes master the language easily despite having no formal instruction, or why people who play videogames or computer games which require language for their completion perform better or at least have a much wider vocabulary than that of people who only have contact with L2 in the classroom. The importance of input and attention in L2 will be further discussed in the following sections.

Noticing

Exposure to input is one of the few conditions widely regarded as vital to both L1 and L2 acquisition processes. However, what is often overlooked is how distinct the role of attention in these two processes normally is. L1 learners go through fairly similar learning situations, i.e. daily family care, while L2 learners, with different demands and levels of interest, may have contact with a second or foreign language in different ways, with different frequency and intensity, at different stages in their lives. Whereas babies are passively attentive to everybody and everything around them, including language, days

[1] In the *Wug* study conducted by Jean Berko (1958), a request to form a plural made to young children met an 'I don't know' type of answer, but when shown the picture of a *wug* and subsequently of two the children promptly and accurately answered there were two *wugs* when asked.

may pass before L2 learners hear any input in the target language and when they do it might not even be relevant enough for them to actually perceive it. All of us have probably watched films of which we can remember whole lines and scenes that touched or amused us. But how many others have we watched of which we can barely recall the title, plot or cast – sometimes we even forget we ever watched them. This is bound to sound obvious and simple, but it somehow illustrates the non-homogeneity of what we pay attention to, what we notice of and about things – regardless of the input to which we are exposed. As one may wonder, this is not different in SLA; unlike babies, L2 learners must pay attention to things in order to learn them; otherwise these might just go unnoticed. The importance of noticing language features is what is discussed henceforth.

There have been many views concerning the importance of consciousness in language acquisition. Theories and hypotheses abound, mostly due to its difficult definition. Many, though without much theoretical support, firmly defend that a language can only be appropriately used and produced through conscious understanding of its system. In spite of the acknowledged influence of consciousness in the development of language systems and in language performance (BIALYSTOK, 1978; RUTHERFORD; SHARWOOD SMITH, 1985), there are no grounds to prove the study of grammar is a sufficient condition to acquisition, as empirical evidence shows us cases of proficient speakers who had no such aid. Others, quite contrarily, such as Krashen (1981), seem to accredit the core of real acquisition to "unconsciousness", which led to the controversial, yet enticing, idea of learning not ever becoming acquisition. According to him, learning, as in conscious knowledge ABOUT things, can only be of use to monitor production. Spontaneous production would only be triggered by what has been acquired (genuine learning) subconsciously. Another more extreme position held by Odlin (1986) proposes divorcing from this notion; this seems to be rooted in Behaviorist beliefs of learning as habit formation, in which consciousness is epiphenomenal, rather than an actual development of understanding. Notwithstanding, the view endorsed by this study was extensively developed by Richard W. Schmidt (1991; 1994a; 1994b; 1995a; 1995b and 2001), whose most invaluable efforts include more accurately describing and organizing the slippery concepts of consciousness, attention and awareness, not to mention pointing out their importance to SLA. The Noticing Hypothesis, which he devised, will be discussed in the following paragraph.

The Noticing Hypothesis concerns the process through which input becomes intake, that is, the extent to which and the reason why input is absorbed since we cannot apprehend all the information we are exposed to in the input. No consensus has been reached on the definition of intake, except that it is crucial to SLA theory. According to Schmidt (1990), "intake is that part of the input that the learner notices" (p.139). Regardless of how it happens, "if [it is] noticed, it becomes intake" (p.139). He goes on to mention an earlier study (SCHMIDT; FROTA, 1986) where he kept a journal of what called his attention language-wise in his everyday interactions along with class notes while learning Brazilian Portuguese for 5 months in Brazil. In the study, he was tape-recorded monthly and the analyses showed "remarkable correspondence between [his] reports of what [he] had noticed when Brazilians talked to [him] and the linguistic forms [he] used [himself]" (SCHMIDT, 1990, p.140), also, when comparing his performance on verbal constructions, some of which he had been explicitly taught, pointed to "the fact that [if] a particular verb form had been taught [it] did not guarantee that it would appear in [his] output" (SCHMIDT, 1990, p. 140). This seems to corroborate the claim that input will go partially unnoticed if attention is not paid. One may assume that this happens mostly because of the artificiality of the language classroom environment in terms of real communication. That is, the language used in "real" everyday conversations, or needed to understand an episode of your favorite TV series, for example, is more significant, and therefore more susceptible to be noticed, than that taught in the classroom which has no clear or tangible use for many students. How to make classroom-taught English more noticeable is an important topic for further discussion.

Another of Schmidt and Frota's (1986) findings was that noticing alone did not suffice for learning in some cases such as when, as we may also have seen our students do, he was asked a question using a particular grammatical form by his interlocutor and used it in his reply. This might mislead us to think that he had noticed it, yet he never used it again, which suggests that he might not have been able to process it deeply enough perhaps due to lack of further exposition. A satisfactory explanation for this could be that not all input which is understood for meaning can be noticed for intake of form immediately (VAN PATTEN, 1985; 1987; SCHMIDT 1990). Van Patten (1985; 1987) has argued that only after meaning processing becomes automatic for learners is that they will be able to focus on less communicative, more structural aspects of input. This indicates that, contrary to what is seen in many coursebooks, the input presented to learners must be extensive and recycled

systematically so that it can be noticed for meaning and form in the long run, not just for the completion of a lesson's task and then completely forgotten, as in Schmidt's anecdote above.

One questionable point in Schmidt's (1990) article is that "subliminal language learning is impossible" (p. 149) and that "intake is what learners *consciously* notice" (p. 149, emphasis added). In our opinion, form and meaning can be noticed *both* consciously and unconsciously as long as input is sufficient and relevant. Yet it is decidedly arguable that adult learners rely more heavily on the former. What is more, the quick one-topic-per-lesson pace of language courses these days makes us wonder if the latter is really possible for learners whose contact with language takes place mostly or only in the classroom setting, often on a twice-a-week basis. Schmidt somehow contradicts himself and supports such a claim by saying that "what learners notice is constrained by a number of factors, but incidental learning is certainly possible when task demands focus attention on relevant features of input" (1990, p. 149); though for him even this incidental learning must be conscious. Schmidt concludes his 1990 article by saying that "paying attention to language is hypothesized to be facilitative in all cases and may be necessary for adult acquisition of redundant grammatical features" (1990, p. 149), that alone is a good reason for us to keep thinking of ways to make language instruction more effective by facilitating input encoding and making target features more salient for easier noticing and subsequent intake.

Explicit vs. Implicit Learning and Instruction

By looking up *learning* in the online edition of the Merriam-Webster's dictionary, we will find its second entry: "knowledge or skill acquired by instruction or study" to be an unsurprisingly intertwined definition. If we then take its synonym suggestion: "knowledge" into consideration, it should be quite clear how these concepts overlap in common understanding, let alone how intrinsically related to instruction they seem to be known to be. This is hardly much different in SLA theory, despite no definitive consensus on these definitions has ever been reached. According to Hulstjin (2005):

> Explicit learning is input processing with the conscious intention to find out whether the input information contains regularities and, if so, to work out the concepts and rules with which these regularities can be captured. Implicit learning is input processing without such an intention, taking place unconsciously (p.131).

Put simply, explicit and implicit learning can be understood as learning of explicit and implicit knowledge, respectively (see DEKEYSER, 2003, for more detailed definitions[2]). On the other hand, instruction, then, will be considered explicit if learners are given information on how the input they are exposed to is organized, that is to say, if they receive the rules by which they must try to internalize that input. Implicit instruction, therefore, takes place when learners are exposed to meaningful input, allowing them to extract information about its workings on their own. In this latter type of instruction settings, students are normally guided towards internalizing rules, mainly through elicitation or in task-based lessons, but are not explicitly provided with them. These two approaches to instruction are likely to be associated and confused with deductive and inductive instruction. However, this association does not hold, as deductive and inductive learning differ in that the former takes place when rules are presented before actual input is observed, while the latter takes place when input, in the form of examples, is analyzed and, hopefully, understood for meaning before rules are inferred (DEKEYSER, 1995). In other words, both deductive and inductive instructions are encompassed by explicit instruction since rules are given at some point or another.

The issue of the extent to which implicit and explicit teaching contribute to speed up L2 development is most certainly a fascinating one, and so is its tight relation to Schmidt's (1990; 1994a; 1994b; 1995a; 1995b; 2001) Noticing Hypothesis. However, further annotations on its importance and current state of art will not be made due to the restricted scope of this study. Next, the actual experiment that was conducted will be presented in detail.

The study

Objective

The overall objective of this investigation was to analyze the role of explicit instruction in the development of L2 knowledge of the *Present Perfect Tense* in a group of Brazilian learners of English in tasks assessing both comprehension and production. Thus, the independent variable was explicit

[2] Even though it is beyond the scope of the present article, it is worth mentioning that a moderate number of studies have investigated the effectiveness of each kind of instruction (and learning) on different language features (for an extensive review on the studies measuring effects of different kinds of L2 instruction, the reader is referred to Doughty, 2003, who reviewed the work of Tomlin and Villa, 1994, among others).

instruction and the dependent variables were the scores in the comprehension and the production tasks.

Hypotheses

A set of hypotheses were then put forward in the investigation reported here:

1. Students who received instruction focusing on *Present Perfect Tense* would achieve higher scores in both comprehension and production in the post-test assessing knowledge of the target structure;
2. Students who did not receive any instruction focusing on the *Present Perfect Tense* would not show perceptible performance differences between the pre-test and the post-test in either comprehension or production.

Participants

The data analyzed in this experiment comes from two groups of 1st semester undergraduate *Letras* (Languages and Literature) students from a public university in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. A total of 17 learners took part in this study, of which 10 were included in Group A (Experimental Group) and 7 in Group B (Control Group). The selection of participants considered their basic knowledge of English and their availability to take part in the study. Group A consisted of participants who received instruction in the focused topic, while Group B contained individuals who did not receive any instruction before doing the post-test. Participants were taking their first level of English at said university, a Pre-Intermediate equivalent level, or A2-B1 in the Common European Framework of Reference. It is important to note that newly admitted students are encouraged to take placement tests and skip levels according to their results, which ensures reasonable homogeneity level-wise.

Group A – Experimental Group

Group A was formed by 7 female and 3 male subjects aging 16 to 48. The average age was 22.6 and, except for a journalist and a retired military servant, most of the subjects were students. The majority reported having studied English at regular schools and at private language courses, having thus studied English for more than 4 years in total. Although only 3 declared using English at work, all participants stated they frequently or always used English during their free time – mostly by surfing the web, watching films and

listening to music. Only 2 participants mentioned having studied English abroad, both in England. Other students mentioned traveling to non-English speaking countries, mostly to Brazil's neighboring countries in South America. Almost half of the students said they did not have the habit of studying English outside classroom, among the others, chatting with friends and revising lessons studied in class were the most common alternatives. A good deal of the subjects said they studied English because they liked it, and the vast majority mentioned its importance, in professional terms or otherwise.

3.3.2 Group B – Control Group

Group B is strikingly similar to Group A, with its 4 female and 3 male subjects aging from 19 to 28, average age 22.5. All of them are students and studied English before at regular school or private language courses. In spite of the fact that none of them lived in, studied in or visited English-speaking countries, all of them expressed using English in their free time activities, which included mainly surfing the web, reading books or magazines and listening to music. Differently from Group A, 6 students said they studied English outside classroom by doing exercises from the book or internet besides revising lessons discussed in class. Most of them answered they studied English because of its importance in the professional market while a few other mentioned liking it.

Tasks and Materials

In order to test how explicit instruction might influence learners' understanding of the *Present Perfect Tense*, two pre- and post-tests (assessing comprehension and production) were devised and applied, respectively, before and after a lesson. All tests consisted of 30 questions testing the use of *Present Simple*, *Past Simple* and *Present Perfect tenses*. Six of these questions were used as distractors with one of 3 verbs (love, practice and forget) appearing twice each in the Present Simple and placed at the beginning (questions 1 and 2), in the middle (questions 11 and 20) and at the end (questions 29 and 30) of the tests. From the remaining 24 actually testable questions, 12 were in the *Past Simple* and the other 12 in the *Present Perfect*. Twelve different verbs (like, need, know, think, play, write, work, study, break, find, lose, start) were used once in each set of questions. All verbs were chosen so as to reflect a balanced variety of verbal aspects, namely Achievement verbs (break, find, lose, start), Action verbs (play, write, work, study) and State verbs (like, need, know,

think)[3]. Students were encouraged to use their intuition as they answered the questions, but also not to make wild guesses since none of the tests were to be considered to determine their passing grades.

Comprehension Tasks

Both pre- and post-tests were designed in the exact same manner, containing 30 multiple-choice items, each of which offering a choice of *a*, *b*, *c* or *d*, where *a* alternatives presented verbs in the *Simple Present* tense, *b* alternatives presented verbs in the *Past Simple* tense, *c* alternatives presented verbs in the *Present Perfect* tense, and *d* alternatives were always "I don't know the answer" in order to reduce accidental correct guessing which might reflect participants' knowledge inaccurately. All items consisted of a four-line dialogue between two people, in which either the last or the penultimate sentence of each dialogue presented a blank instead of a verbal construction which could be completed by one of the alternatives (a, b or c). Additionally, all test items were carefully written and re-written so that all blanks were placed where either affirmative or negative constructions were required. No interrogative forms were included since this structure may require larger processing demand. The main, relevant difference between pre- and post-tests was context-wise as a way of ensuring item complexity levels were not altered between tasks. Also, vocabulary support was provided on spot whenever students felt the need for it. A few sample test items shall illustrate the materials better:

(1) Sample Simple Past Test Item – STATE Verb (Pre-test):

– What are you reading?
– *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown. Have you read it?
– Yes, but the plot is almost the same as *Angels and Demons*. Don't you think?
– That's true. But I _____ *Angels and Demons* better when I read it. I found it more gripping.

(a) like
(b) liked *
(c) have liked
(d) I don't know the answer

[3] The verbs chosen were broken down by lexical aspectual class, following evidence that verbal aspect affects L2 acquisition of verbal morphology. For deeper discussion, the reader is referred to Bardovi-Harlig and Reynolds (1995), Andersen and Shirai (1996), Finger (2000), among many others.

(2) Sample Present Perfect Test Item – ACTION Verb (Pre-Test):

– What do think of the news?
– Quite shocking, I'm afraid.
– Yes, firing the president in the middle of an upturn is certainly not what I expected.
– It sure isn't. I _____ here all my life and I don't remember anything as surprising as this.

(a) work
(b) worked
(c) have worked*
(d) I don't know the answer

* expected answer

Production Tasks

Even though a comprehension test alone might suffice to provide insight on whether students recognize and understand the differences of use between *Past Simple* and *Present Perfect*, only by contrasting results with a freer production test could we start to comprehend the extent to which these sometimes subtle differences had been internalized by the learners, since spontaneous and intentional verb choices can only be made by speakers who not only recognize but feel the need for them as they try to express meaning.

With that said, it is important to note that a simple translation exercise would not be appropriate for many reasons, mostly because the very act of choosing could be directly affected by linguistic transfer, since it is difficult to avoid verbatim translation once you are prompted to do so (to some extent), not to mention that translating would likely limit participants' choice of words to those more directly correlated in their mother tongue. Concomitantly, using English contexts to prompt responses could be marring, for neither risking having participants misinterpret these contexts nor leveling them down to ensure understanding would lend themselves to the purpose of the task.

The adopted course of action then was to provide test takers with 30 L1 (Portuguese) contexts which prompted L2 (English) responses, with vocabulary aid in L2 being provided on spot whenever students felt the need for it. These contexts were written with a view not to impose any pre-set response or induce translation of any kind, though, of course, some translation would be inevitable. Being as this was a freer production test, answers were almost completely unpredictable. In order to reduce this unpredictability, though, participants were asked to try as much as possible to respond in one

single sentence. Besides, each of the 15 verbs featured in the comprehension test was prompted twice for use in the 30-item task (they were given within parentheses after each context). A 1st person singular personal pronoun *I* was also placed as a subject at the beginning of the space provided for answers, as it may be seen in the samples below:

(3) Sample Simple Past Test Item – STATE Verb (Pre-Test):

Seu chefe quer saber por que alguns documentos que você pediu eram necessários. Os documentos eram necessários para comprovar a legitimidade de um contrato. Como você explica isso?
(NEED)

_____

(4) Sample Present Perfect Test Item – ACTION Verb (Pre-Test):

Em uma entrevista de emprego, o entrevistador quer saber se o seu espanhol é bom. Você quer dizer que começou a estudar há três anos e ainda faz aulas. Como você diria isso?
(STUDY)

_____

Once again, it is worth mentioning that the main difference between pre- and post-tests was context-wise and the complexity level was controlled as much as possible.

Lesson Plan

The lesson plan that was followed in the instruction was based on lesson 4A of *New Headway Pre-Intermediate* by Clive Oxenden, Christina Latham-Koenig and Paul Seligson, published by Oxford University Press (2005). The original lesson focus was on Clothes – Vocabulary, introducing the difference between *Simple Past* and *Present Perfect* in the context of interviews containing *Have you ever…?* questions followed by *Simple Past* questions for detail. As much as possible, the ideas presented on the *Teacher's Book* were followed and most of the extra material contained in its in-built resource pack was used. In addition, some handouts were devised so as to provide participants with more input and practice in the target topic (Present Perfect). The course book in question can be said to favor a communicative approach to teaching, in spite of its apparently heavy focus on grammar, and most of its lessons seem to be molded into a traditional Presentation–Practice–Production (P-P-P)

framework. Nevertheless, no methodological inclination or preference is stated in either the Teacher's or the Student's book, except for "the tools students need to speak English with confidence are Grammar, Vocabulary and Pronunciation (G, V, P)…" (New English File Pre-Intermediate, Teacher's Book, 2005, p. 8). These were taken into account during the preparation of the lesson plan, which was conceived through the lenses of communicative approaches and the Noticing Hypothesis (SCHMIDT, 1990; 1994a; 1994b; 1995a; 1995b; 2001), and included all the stages of a P-P-P routine, which ran along with an orientation towards teaching by demanding elicitation and induction from participants in an effort to help them notice the language feature in focus rather than just memorize a set of structural rules. Lastly, it must be said that the original lesson itself provided little input (only the *Have you ever been to a Zara store?* Question) and the introduction of extra input throughout the lesson may have been relevant to this study's outcome.

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was held during May and June, 2009, in three 110-minute (1h50) morning meetings with each group, totaling 6 meetings. The meetings were held at the same time of the participants English I class on each day. No off-schedule or extra meetings were required and none of the activities was done outside the classroom setting.

On the first day, participants were given a short personal information questionnaire along with the consent form. They were then instructed in the proceedings of the experiment, assured their results would be kept anonymously and have no influence over their grades, informed their intuition, rather than intelligence, was being tested, and, ultimately, of the volunteer character of their participation. Participants were allowed 15 minutes before receiving the comprehension test. Production tests were handed out to participants as they concluded the previous. Once all was finished, each participant would hand in their personal information questionnaire, consent form and both tests, just then were they assigned a participant number, by which they would be designated from then on.

On day 2, the lesson was given to the Experimental Group as planned. The class was all conducted in English and students were responsive to the language, keeping it as the medium of communication during class time. Students were very participative and seemed willing to cooperate and interact,

which undoubtedly helped plans run smoothly and as expected.

The post-test step was the quickest in the series, since participants already knew what to expect. Once again, students first received the comprehension test and, as soon as they had finished it, were given the production test.

Comparative tables of participants' pre- and post-test results were organized in *Microsoft Excel 2007* spreadsheets and then analyzed in *SPSS*. Data analysis and discussion will be presented next.

Results

The analyses are based on the participants' scores on the tests, where learners in Group A (Experimental Group) were taught a lesson (see Lesson plan section) and learners in Group B did not receive any instruction regarding the topic at test – the *Present Perfect Tense*.

Comprehension Task

If we are to believe that students' ability to comprehend structures is naturally higher than their ability to produce them, it is reasonable to expect participants' results to be normally better in the Comprehension Task than in the Production Task. Moreover, as previously stated as part of this study's hypotheses, participants from Group A (Experimental Group), who received instruction in the target topic, were logically expected to perform better in their post-test, whereas the performance of the participants in the Control Group would remain the same as they were not instructed or exposed to the topic at all.

As can be seen in Table 1, Group A's participants performed better than Group B's overall, having improved their results by 4.58% in the second test, whilst the latter had a slight 2.38% decrease in their score.

TABLE 1
Mean (and standard deviation) scores in the Comprehension Task (Total Score = 24)

	Pre-test	Post-test
Group A (*n=10*)	15.7 (2.67)	16.8 (4,98)
Group B (*n=07*)	13.86 (2.19)	13.43 (2.99)

Overall results show that the participants in the Experimental group

achieved higher scores than the participants in the Control group after instruction, even though the difference between the scores in the pre- and post-tests was not statistically significant for either group. The standard deviation was also higher in the Experimental group.

When the answers given by participants from both groups are analyzed separately for Past Simple and Present Perfect questions, the results are more revealing. The results of the ANOVA indicate an interaction between group and verb structure $F(3,36)=17.935$, $p<0.0001$). The analysis also indicates a significant difference between the scores in the pre-test and the post-test for the Present Perfect target items for the Experimental Group ($t(9)=0.033$, $p < 0.05$) but not for the Simple Past items for the Experimental. Such scores can be taken to indicate a propensity for improvement in the understanding of the target structure after instruction.

In addition, as expected, no significant difference between the two structures tested (Present Perfect and Simple Past) were found for the Control group. It is also interesting to note that the correct answers for the Simple Past items for both groups dropped in the post-test, though not significantly. It is compelling to note that the instruction given on the Present Perfect Tense, seemingly, did not cause significant confusion and mistaking in previously learned verb structures, such as the Simple Past.

TABLE 2
Simple Past and Present Perfect mean (and standard deviation) Breakdown – Comprehension Task
(Total test items: 24, 12 Simple Past and 12 Present Perfect targets)

	Simple Past (12)		Present Perfect (12)	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Group A (*n=10*)	11.4 (0.97)	10.9 (1.97)	4.3 (2.83)	5.9 (3.93)
Group B (*n=07*)	10.43 (1.72)	10.28 (1.70)	3.43 (1.72)	3.14 (2.27)

Production Task

Even though L2 learners may sometimes understand newly encountered structures and vocabulary right away by means of contextual logic or even positive L1 transfer, it must be agreed that it is much more unlikely to see the very same learners produce language they do not fully command or with which

they do not, at least, feel comfortable and confident to handle. Despite the immanently freer character of a Production task, in comparison to its Comprehension counterpart, an increase in correct Present Perfect answers was expected to take place after instruction for the Experimental group. Another caveat here is, once more due to the freer character of this task, the unavoidable room for avoidance (re-contextualization of sentences so as to make them right while using known structures, i.e., avoiding the use of the target structure). All avoidance entries (grammatically, but not contextually correct) were considered incorrect for the purposes of this experiment in a bid to keep things simple, as well as to reduce chances of misinterpretation.

As shown in TAB. 3, both the Experimental and the Control groups achieved significantly higher scores in the post-test: $t(9)=4.981$, $p<0.001$ and $t(6)=3.057$, $p<0.05$, respectively.

TABLE 3
General Results – Mean (and standard deviation scores) in the Production Task (Total score = 24)

	Pre-test	Post-test
Group A (*n=10*)	9 (2.21)	13.7 (2.91)
Group B (*n=07*)	6.86 (1.95)	11.29 (2.75)

It is interesting to note that the participants in the Control group, which did not receive any instruction on the target topic, also showed significant improvement in the post-test, similarly to what happened in the Experimental group. A closer look at the results, however, reveals that there are important differences between the two groups of participants, as shown in TAB. 4, which presents the scores for Present Perfect and Simple Past items for each group separately.

TABLE 4
Simple Past and Present Perfect Mean Scores (and standard deviations) in the Production Task (Total test items = 24, 12 with Simple Past and 12 with Present Perfect)

	Simple Past (12)		Present Perfect (12)	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Group A (*n=10*)	6.4 (2.01)	8.2 (1.40)	2.6 (2.67)	5.5 (3.63)
Group B (*n=07*)	6 (2.08)	8,6 (1.27)	0.86 (0.38)	2.71 (2.29)

Statistical tests conducted on the data reveal that the participants of Group A showed a significant increase in correct scores for both Present Perfect ($t(9)=-4.411$, $p<0.01$) and Simple Past ($t(9)=-3.037$, $p<0.05$) structures after instruction. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the learners in Group B showed a significant improvement in Simple Past sentences in the post-test ($t(6)= -3.057$, $p<0.05$) but not in the Present Perfect items.

The significant increase in correct scores for the Present Perfect items demonstrated by the learners from the Experimental group seems like pertinent evidence of how instruction can directly affect students' perception of target structure to the point of enabling them to use it more often, and confidently, in as few as one lesson. In spite of their perceivably small difference, Group A's results indicate that instruction was beneficial to learning, or at least not negative since non-instructed Group B obtained an inferior improvement rate in the target items. Group A's improved performance is apparently connected to the structure familiarization provided by instruction, as stated in our hypothesis. On the other hand, Group B's slight improvement could result from L1 interference, of positive nature in this case, and not necessarily an improvement in students' perception and understanding of the target structure.

Result-Hypothesis Cross Analysis

Taking the results of the Comprehension task here presented, it is possible to notice that they lend themselves to strongly supporting the idea that instruction of a target language item, namely the Present Perfect Tense, is beneficial to language development and can lead to prominently better performance in the second of two tasks of similar complexity taken before and after instruction, therefore validating hypothesis 1. Furthermore, the virtually stagnant results achieved in the same tasks by Group B come to highlight how linguistic / pedagogic insertions do help shape students' perceptions of how languages work, as anticipated in hypothesis 2.

In a similar fashion, the analysis of specific results in the production task seems to entail the consistency of hypothesis 2. Results achieved by Group A's participants were again significantly superior to those of Group B's, denoting that exposition and instruction do not only affect students' perception of language items, but also provide them with enough linguistic reference to foster their attempts at using these items.

Final Considerations

In this article, we have claimed that L2 instruction has positive effects on students' use of Present Perfect. The results presented here strongly support the practice of explicit instruction in the classroom environment. However, this study is obviously not sufficient to determine whether explicit instruction can result in improved participants' performance if compared to implicit instruction. Further investigation is also needed to prove the efficiency of extended input in addition to instruction since groups receiving different amounts of target input were not tested.

The analysis of the collected data depicted a favorable average performance increase in comprehension and in production tasks for participants who received explicit instruction of the tested structure. These numbers show significant short-term improvement for the group. Additional testing is still required in order for long-term efficiency to be verified.

Lastly, we would like to point out that it is ever more important for language teachers to be aware of how they can positively influence their students' perception and understanding of an L2. Unfortunately, much of what is known and many of what are believed to be best classroom practices are based on theoretically unfounded, scientifically untested tradition. This becomes even more urgent in a developing country such as Brazil, where high demands for second language qualification sadly meet traditionally unqualified school professionals, poor infra-structure and teaching conditions. It is in the midst of these hurdles that engaged language professionals must pursue pedagogically sound and well-informed principles to follow and develop research on with a view to reshaping tradition and advancing towards more effective and meaningful English Language Teaching.

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