



Is explicit instruction effective? The learning of English noun-noun and adjective-noun structures by L1 Spanish school children (¿Es efectiva la instrucción explícita? El aprendizaje de las estructuras nombre-nombre y adjetivo-nombre del inglés por escolares de L1 español)

Eduardo Gómez-Garzarán  and Raquel Fernández-Fuertes 

Universidad de Valladolid

ABSTRACT

The relative order of constituents within determiner phrases (DP) in which the noun is modified by an adjective (AN) has traditionally been taught in English as an L2 subject in the Spanish context. This is not the case for the same type of phrase in which the N-head is modified by another N (NN). This study aims to assess the impact of direct instruction in English NNs as part of the school curriculum. Acceptability judgement data and production have been elicited from two groups of L1 Spanish-L2 English children living in Spain, one receiving explicit NN instruction and the other following the regular only-AN instruction. Results show an advancement of the instruction group not only in NNs but also in ANs. This has a double implication: that NNs and ANs might share a common morphosyntactic underlying structure and that explicit teaching of grammatical properties that are shared by different structures might result in better attainment.

RESUMEN

En el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera en España se enseña el orden relativo de los elementos en sintagmas determinantes (SDet) en los que un adjetivo modifica a un nombre (AN). No ocurre lo mismo con sintagmas de este tipo en los que el nombre núcleo está modificado por otro nombre (NN). En este estudio se evalúa el impacto de la instrucción directa de los compuestos NN como parte integral del currículum. Se obtuvieron datos a partir de pruebas de juicios de aceptabilidad y de producción de dos grupos de escolares con español como primera lengua (L1), residentes en España, que cursaban estudios de inglés como segunda lengua (L2); uno de ellos con instrucción explícita sobre la estructura NN y el otro con instrucción tradicional únicamente sobre la estructura AN. Los resultados revelan mayor avance del grupo con instrucción explícita, no solo en relación con las estructuras NN sino también con las estructuras AN. La implicación es doble: por un lado, las estructuras NN y AN podrían compartir una estructura morfosintáctica subyacente común y, por otro lado, la enseñanza explícita de las propiedades gramaticales compartidas por estructuras diferentes podría mejorar el rendimiento en todas ellas.

Noun modification in English, and in particular noun pre-modification (1), has been the focus of investigation in formal linguistics (e.g., Cinque, 2010; Kayne, 1994; Piera, 1995) as well as in previous studies on language acquisition (e.g., Krott, Gagné, & Nicoladis, 2008; Nicoladis, 2002, 2006; Snyder, 2001).

- (1) a. blue car
b. police dog

However, little attention has been paid so far to how these structures are taught and learned in the classroom context where English is learned as a second language (L2). This would be the focus of the present study in which determiner phrases (DPs) involving a noun (N) premodified by either an adjective (A) (1a) or by another N (1b) are targeted. Our aim is twofold: on the one hand, to shed light on the learning process of ANs and NNs and to determine how effective teaching practices can be when it comes to noun modification; and, on the other hand, to put together these two structures that have always been dealt with separately, from the point of view of both formal description and acquisition works.

To carry out this study, data from Spanish children learning English in a CLIL context at a Spanish school are analysed. As the first language of our participants is Spanish, in the first section we compare English and Spanish ANs and NNs. We then focus on previous acquisition studies on monolingual and bilingual children, as a window to determine whether and, if so, how possible cross-linguistic differences have been accounted for. The second section offers a review of the implicit/explicit dichotomy on learning and teaching and of some experimental studies testing the effectiveness of implicit versus explicit teaching. The empirical study appears in the third section where we present the research questions that have guided our research and the methodology we have used to address them, including the selection of participants, the design of experimental tasks and the data codification procedure that has been followed. Results are presented and discussed in the fourth and fifth sections, while the final section outlines the conclusions and points out directions for further work.

Noun modification in English

English-Spanish cross-linguistic differences in ANs and in NNs: directionality

When comparing English and Spanish ANs (2), the issue of directionality is, in fact, the most prominent difference across these two languages (Cinque, 1990, 2010; Kayne, 1994).

- (2) a. blue car
b. coche azul [car blue]

Acknowledgements / Agradecimientos

This work was supported by the Castile and León Regional Government and the ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) under Grant Ref. VA009P17, and by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities and ERDF under Grant Ref. PGC2018-097693-B-I00. / *Este trabajo ha recibido el apoyo de la Junta de Castilla y León y del programa FEDER (Fondo Europeo de Desarrollo Regional; Ref. VA009P17), así como del Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades y FEDER (Ref. PGC2018-097693-B-100).*