

Applied Historical Linguistics. Does Historical Linguistics have a place in the Language Classroom?

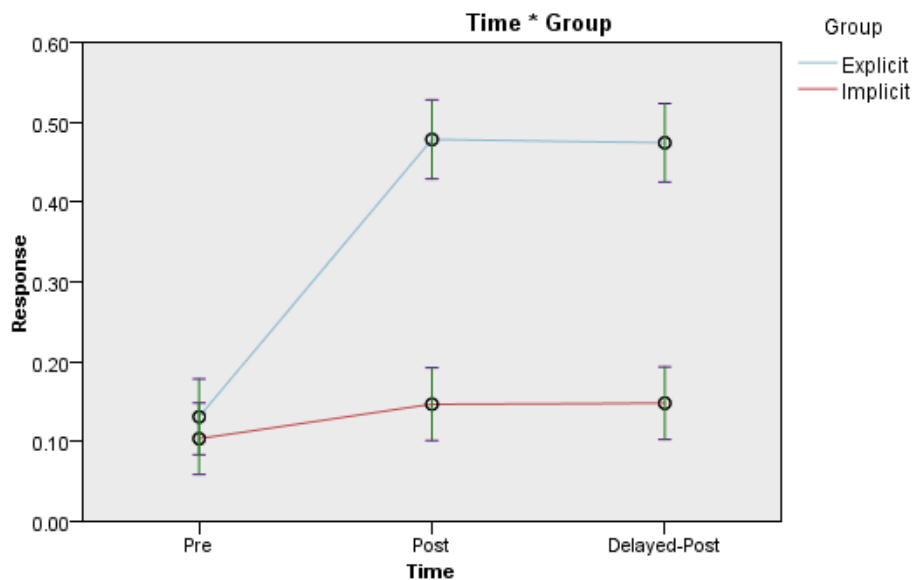
As Germanic languages, English and German share a large number of cognates. However, due to various diachronic changes, such as the Second Germanic Sound Shift (Salmons, 2012: 112-118) and Ingvæonic Palatalization (Lass, 1994: 55), many cognates are no longer recognizable to English-speaking L2 learners of German. Because creating a connection between L1 and L2 knowledge may accelerate the acquisition process (Hall, 2002), it is reasonable to hypothesize that declarative knowledge of these historical changes could be beneficial to speakers of English when learning another Germanic language. Although diachronic instruction has been called for in L2 German language classrooms (Smith, 1968; Wolff, 1993; Lightfoot, 2007), to date, no studies have examined the empirical effects of receiving such instruction.

To examine the effects of receiving diachronic instruction when learning vocabulary, two sections of third-semester German at an American midwestern university took part in this study. Sections were divided into two learning conditions: an explicit condition ($n = 18$) and an implicit condition ($n = 17$). Over the course of a 16-week semester, the two learning conditions received six twenty-minute explicit or implicit training sessions. The explicit condition received explicit instruction on the Second Germanic Sound Shift (Salmons, 2012: 112-118), which accounts for cognate differences such as *Pfeife*-‘pipe’, *Zweige*-‘twig’, *Zunge*-‘tongue’, and Ingvæonic Palatalization (Lass, 1994: 55), which accounts for cognate differences such as *Kirche*-‘church’, *Kinn*-‘chin’, *Käse*-‘cheese’. In contrast, following work on incidental vocabulary acquisition (e.g., Krashen, 2011), the implicit condition engaged in task-based learning activities, with the aim of acquiring cognate meaning incidentally. To account for the instructor as a confounding variable, the same instructor taught both conditions.

Following a pre/post/delayed-post-test design, the two learning conditions carried out an isolated translation task, which consisted of 126 German words (63 cognates, 63 distractors). Of the 63 cognates, 42 were cognates learners encountered during their training sessions and 21 were cognates they had not encountered before. The order of the words was counterbalanced with three possible orders, and the tests were administered on paper during regular class time. To examine the effect of the two interventions on vocabulary acquisition, a series of mixed effects regression models were run in SPSS (IMB Corp., Armonk, NY), with TRANSLATION ACCURACY run as the dependent variable, and LEARNER ID and COGNATE ITEM run as random intercepts.

Results indicate that the explicit condition significantly outperformed the implicit condition (see Figure 1). Not only did the explicit condition learn more cognates than the implicit condition, but they were also able to correctly predict the meaning of many cognates they had not encountered before. A reasonable interpretation of these findings is that the historical instruction the explicit condition received had a significantly greater effect on the learning of cognates compared to the traditional instruction the implicit condition received. This interpretation is grounded in work from Cognitive Psychology, where association building, that is, the creation of a link between a novel stimulus (i.e., the German cognate) and knowledge already stored in long-term memory (i.e., the English cognate), is thought to aid memory retention (Craik & Watkins, 1973; Craik & Tulving, 1975). The results from this study therefore suggest that Historical Linguistics may deserve some place in the L2 classroom, at least when learning a closely related L2.

Figure 1. Knowledge of Encountered Cognates in the Implicit and Explicit Condition from Pre-Test to Delayed-Post-Test



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