

PROMISING PRACTICE

Implicit Learning in the Developmental English Classroom: Reducing Anxiety and Improving Student Success

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Teaching developmental English has allowed me to help students change the trajectory of their lives, which is priceless. Many times, one of the biggest impediments to student success is not learning how to read and write critically; it is anxiety. Students with writing anxiety tend to write sporadically, avoid class, and produce low-level papers (Tsao et al., 2017). Helping students overcome writing anxiety is why I teach developmental English. While I have never had writing anxiety, I am great friends with anxiety of all sorts. It is a beast and quite fun to outsmart. In my decade of teaching at both community colleges and a 4-year university, I have learned that the writing anxiety I so passionately wanted to slay for my students was far worse than I had imagined when studying to teach writing. However, I have found one instructional strategy helpful—implicit learning. Every type of student stands to benefit because implicit learning can change perceptions drastically, allowing students to move forward more confidently in their academic careers. Implicit learning fosters personal identification with the subject, enhances memory capability, and helps students better understand com-

plex material. Most importantly, implicit learning has an almost magical way of blasting writing anxiety, even for those students who have suffered for years.

Implicit learning occurs in the absence of the intention to learn an unfamiliar skill and is particularly useful when the acquired knowledge is not initially easily verbalized in explicit terms (Cleereman et al., 2019). Implicit learning is simply a way of craftily making learning more meaningful so that students are either not immediately aware they have just absorbed a new concept or else realize that they already understood the concept that was introduced. Once students have gained considerable skill, their ability to absorb new, explicitly taught material improves. In this way, implicit learning complements explicit learning (Dornyei, 2019). There are many tools to foster implicit learning, such as chunking, reciprocal teaching, priming, and emulating. I use priming and emulating quite often. Priming occurs when a student’s response to the learning environment is influenced by the previous exposure to a similar task. The process occurs automatically and without conscious awareness (Silkes et al., 2020). Emulation provides the learner with a clear image of how a skill should be performed while simultaneously explaining the concept so that a student can more easily apply the skill gained (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2002).

Explicit learning involves more conscious awareness and focus on form; it also typically includes the immediate learner ability to reproduce metalanguage about the skill (Lichtman, 2013). In other words, explicit learning is far more complicated, in-depth and rigid; it is, regarding English, formulaic and rule-based. Furthermore, there are valid reasons why explicit learning should come *after* implicit learning. Implicit learning occurs more naturally in order for students to achieve acquisition to later apply towards explicitly learned competencies. This is especially the case with grammar instruction which, without some prior implicit learning, can have a “terrifying effect on the students and lower their self-confidence” (Rahman & Rashid, 2017, p. 96). I consider implicit learning a soft, unassuming predecessor to more explicit instruction and assert that the two can peacefully co-exist throughout the entirety of the semester.

Here is an example of priming to allow for implicit learning in the classroom. If a student reads aloud a sentence to me, “Went to the store,” I have two options: I can cover the rules of grammar (clauses, sentence structure, fragments, etc.), or I can say something like, “Hey, if I walked up to you in the hall and said, ‘Went to the store,’ would that

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make sense to you? What’s missing there?” The latter is an example of implicit learning. It is also how learners naturally learn a language (and many other things) at a young age. I may follow up with a short remark about fragments, but I do not initially go into a detailed explanation about independent versus dependent clauses. Instead, I let the student bask in the realization that the written word and the spoken word are not so different after all, and I watch her revel in the empowerment that she knew the rule all along. She has just met with a grammatical concept, effortlessly understood it, and could personally identify with the material. The student’s realization of her understanding was a huge anxiety crusher. In fact, not only can this kind of implicit learning reduce anxiety, but (at least early on in the semester) explicit instruction and feedback can actually enhance anxiety (Nakagawa & Leung, 2019). While I may warn the student that we will revisit fragments in more complexity later, I reinforce that she already has some knowledge, making going forward far less intimidating.

Some argue that the deviation from using explicit instruction, at least where grammar is concerned, is detrimental (Andringa et al., 2011). This is a reasonable concern because students also benefit from explicit instruction (Young-Davy, 2014). However, what is so often overlooked is that once a student begins to achieve greater levels of writing ability, her confidence carries over to new, related concepts, and she is better able to assimilate new knowledge that is partly or wholly explicitly taught. In other words, implicitly learned knowledge primes future, explicitly learned knowledge (Lichtman & VanPatten 2021). Therefore, explicit learning still gets some limelight, as it should.

Aside from reducing anxiety, priming can help students with recall limitations (Maddox et al., 2019). One example is when I teach the rhetorical appeals, I do not tell students what I am introducing. Instead, after looking at a few commercials and identifying what each company wants us to buy, we discuss whether the commercial gave us logical reasons and evidence to buy the product, whether there was any information about the company’s credibility, and whether the commercial had an emotional impact. Importantly, I do not give any explicit instruction about rhetorical appeals whatsoever. We stay completely in the realm of the familiar and the effortless. In the next class, I provide an explicit lecture about the types of rhetorical appeals. I also reiterate that the students already know the concepts but simply are learning the names associ-

ated with the rhetorical devices they already understand. This puts them at ease because they see that the concept of rhetorical appeals is not a mysterious, unconquerable beast. Rhetorical appeals are a bit complex to be sure, but once the general ideas have already been grasped, there is a steadiness as we delve deeper. This anxiety reduction may contribute (at least partly) to the enhanced memory recall of the material—shown to be a marked effect of priming. After all, I remember far more when I am relaxed and confident about what I am learning.

Emulation is also an extraordinary tool to foster implicit learning. Emulation involves giving written feedback (about grammar or content), while emulating the concept. For example, if I see a sentence in a student essay, “I am usually quiet, however that day I was talkative,” I may write: Be careful when you use the word “however.” You should start a new sentence after “quiet” or else you will have a comma splice. Although it seems like “however” functions as a conjunction word like “but,” it actually starts a new sentence. It does show contrast like “but.” However, it does not serve as a contrast conjunction word like “but” because it cannot combine two sentences.

I have given explicit instruction and an example—without the student recognizing she has absorbed the example. Once the student is farther along in the semester, I will write something like this: You have three comma splice errors in this paragraph. They all involve the use of the word “however.” Your content in this paragraph is amazing. However, if you don’t correct these comma splices, you will hurt your ethos (and lose points!). With emulation, students more readily understand our feedback (Khadawardi, 2020) and with each new concept grasped, confidence eats away at their writing anxiety.

Developmental English students stand to benefit greatly from implicit learning. Incorporation of implicit learning in the classroom is simple. The largest roadblock is the conception that explicit learning is the only tool necessary for success. Because of my own experience and because of mounting data in favor of implicit learning, I have begun to introduce more implicit learning techniques, and as such, I have seen continually improving academic performance. With continued research into the complex ways in which we learn, perhaps educators can utilize more implicit learning tools that will quiet our students’ anxiety and give them the well-deserved confidence they need to move forward successfully with their next class and beyond.

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