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### **Interview with May, a Thai ESL student**

May is the fictitious name of a 22-year-old IEP student at Georgia State University who will apply for the computer science undergraduate program next year. She has been in the United States for five years and matriculated at ESL classes for the same period of time. Before she immigrated to this country from Thailand she had received high school instruction for a year. She is an au pair for an American family and, as a result, she has many opportunities to use her English language skills. The family seems to appreciate her and she feels protected in that environment. This 45-minute interview took place at a coffee shop in downtown Atlanta on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2004.

When I presented Robinson's 1997 article, I asked myself which approach (implicit, incidental, enhanced and instructed) would be preferred by my interviewee and why. I also wanted to conduct research as to which approach was used in her ESL instruction in Thailand as opposed to the United States and how she perceived them.

After I asked May some introductory questions, I provided a brief explanation of each approach through the use of a model sentence: "Susana is used to staying up late". Then after she repeated back what she had understood about each approach, I asked her which one she thought it would help her learn English faster. She affirmed that the instructed approach appeared to be more effective because it gives her a better grounding if she wants to apply to higher education.

Explicit grammar instruction is favored in Thai high schools and that is what May is accustomed to. Students were taught the rule and then completed several fill-in-the-gap

exercises or corrected ungrammatical sentences on the textbook, which is easy for them since she has the rule to rely on. However, an explanation of the meaning was not always provided, so sometimes May completed her tasks but did not always have a full grasp of the meaning because her sole goal was to pass the tests. In contrast, there is much more focus on meaning rather than form in the United States, which facilitates communication in the learner's daily life. May believes that the enhanced approach can be effective but it does not provide as much support when she needs to write or speak "correctly". She would like to have more explicit grammar instruction, especially when she needs to write "correctly" in her Composition/Structure class by making the right choice of verb tenses. The Thai language does not have as many verb tenses as does English. According to May, time is conveyed through the use of 'yesterday', 'today' and 'tomorrow' (I eat today, I eat yesterday and I eat tomorrow). Even though she understands the concept of perfect tenses and can recognize them, she has difficulty applying them, particularly in spontaneous speech due to its immediacy. Writing, on the other hand, allows her to think about the example sentences she has memorized or look at her notes, which increases the likelihood of making correct use of the verb tenses. From my observations, she is able to learn verb tenses and apply them in guided activities that are in proximity to the examples provided by the teacher or the textbook. She showed me a sheet with time lines illustrating past, future and continuous perfect tenses along with example sentences. May answered most of them correctly in an exercise that followed the format of the examples, but she was unsuccessful in transferring them to a narrative she had drafted the previous week.

On the other hand, distinguishing compound from complex sentences and dependent from independent phrases did not pose such a challenge. Her teacher went over their differences several times during this month and she now feels so confident identifying them that she could even “teach it”. In other words, she possessed conscious knowledge.

When asked which would be the least effective approach in her opinion she pointed to implicit, and justified her choice by saying that looking at a sentence without any kind of explanation or visuals would make it difficult for her to recall all the “-ings”, “-eds” and “-tos” in English. She said she can only “pick up” the patterns that are easy . However, she could not give an example of something she learned implicitly, which suggests that implicit learning is an unconscious process.

Even though she does not favor it, she has learned a lot of grammar by rote. In Thailand, memorization is common practice in public schools, but not as much in the United States. Last year, for example, her teacher gave her a list of approximately 15 verbs that were followed by gerund, but she was not able to replicate only four in the interview. She justified her inability to recollect them by saying that they were learned a long time ago and added that memorization is useful in the short run, and if the knowledge is relevant. I noticed that the verbs she recalled were high frequency ones such as ‘stop’ and, as a result, they were acquired.

Evidently, May has a difficulty applying the English verb tenses probably because her temporal notion in her L1 differs significantly from L2. Even though she can notice the nuances, she is still unable to apply it. That may explain why she felt the need for explicit rules. However, as pointed out by Robinson (1997), there are “certain limits to

the effectiveness of these techniques (...) such as interaction between complexity and learning. This suggests that conscious rule learning is only effective for categorical rules describing simple patterns of covariance” (p.225). Conversely, since types of sentences and phrases did not pose such a challenging for the learner, rule-based instruction was effective.

To summarize, there may be a relation between the level of complexity of a given grammatical pattern and the preference for one approach over another. Further, there are both commonalities and differences from the pedagogical practices in Thailand and the US. The shift from rule-based to form-focused and/or meaning-focused instruction can be beneficial to ESL student who needs to communicate in the target language.

Robinson, P. (1997). Generalizability and Automaticity and Second Language Learning under Implicit, Incidental, Enhanced and Instructed Conditions. *SSLA*, 19, 223-247.