Key concepts in ELT

Deductive vs. inductive language learning

Deductive reasoning applies a general rule to particular instances while inductive reasoning involves inference from the particular to the general. Language learning is most clearly deductive when a teacher gives an explicit statement of the rule, which the students then apply to examples. The term 'inductive' most obviously applies when a child learns its first language by inducing the rules from exposure to the language in use. A deductive approach is most closely associated with the grammar–translation method of teaching languages, while an inductive approach is considered characteristic of audiolingualism, where meaning and grammar were not explicitly explained but induced from carefully graded exposure to and practice with examples in situations and substitution tables.

In the grammar–translation method, the focus on rules was conscious and explicit. In audiolingualism, learning of the rules could be either conscious or unconscious (depending on what the learner was thinking about) but they were not explicitly formulated. In between these two approaches, there is a range of techniques, commonly called 'discovery' or 'guided discovery' techniques, in which explicit focus is combined with inference from examples. These techniques vary according to whether explanation of the rules takes place before or after practice and according to the degree of guidance the students are given in working out the rules.

Frequently, in the presentation stage, the teacher establishes a context or situation and elicits appropriate language, asking concept questions to check understanding of form, meaning, and use. Or he or she might put two contrasting items on the board and elicit the difference in meaning between them. The procedure is direct and teacher-fronted, but by eliciting the rule rather than telling the students, the teacher introduces an element of discovery learning, albeit heavily guided. At other times the students may work more independently of the teacher in pairs or groups, engaged in a problem-solving approach to new language. They might be asked to find all the different ways of referring to the future in a text, or to work out the differences in form and meaning between sets of contrasting sentences.

After 'discovering' a rule for themselves in this way, they can be asked to formulate it for the class.

Such procedures, though involving inference from examples, have been labelled 'modified deductive' because there is explicit formulation of the rule before practice. Where the rule is explicitly formulated, either by the teacher or the students after the students have been guided to work it out through practice, the label 'modified inductive' has been used to distinguish this from a purely inductive approach in which the rule is left implicit. The common denominator with this range of techniques is the fact that the students are actively engaged mentally, which is not only motivating but is believed to lead to more thorough learning.

From one lesson to another, and throughout the same lesson, a teacher may switch approach. Feedback on errors, for example, could take the form of either telling the student the rule or guiding him to work it out himself. Students are likely to understand and remember better what they have worked out for themselves; on the other hand, when time is short or it is difficult for the students to work out the rule themselves, a deductive approach may be more appropriate.

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Further reading

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