

Implicit and Explicit Teaching of Grammar: An Empirical Study*

Enseñanza implícita y explícita de la gramática:
Un estudio empírico

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This is a report on the experimental phase of a two-stage study on the effects of implicit-explicit grammar instruction regarding EFL students' performance. The purpose of this phase was to investigate whether the methodologies of implicit and explicit EFL instruction account for the improvement of university students' performance on a test over two grammar topics. Three groups were selected. Students in the implicit language classes had no explicit instruction on these topics which were taught through meaningful and contextualised listening, speaking, reading and writing activities. Students in the explicit language classes were taught the regular course plus additional exercises and drills in order to practise the grammatical features, and a control group was taught the regular course. The results indicate that students in the explicit instruction group achieved significantly higher scores than both the students in the implicit instruction group and the students in the control group on the performance tests.

Key words: Grammar-Input, Implicit-Grammar, Explicit-Grammar, Grammar-Teaching, Quantitative-Research

Éste es un informe de la fase experimental de un estudio en dos etapas sobre los efectos de la enseñanza implícita y explícita de la gramática en el desempeño de los estudiantes. El propósito de esta etapa era investigar si las metodologías implícita y explícita se relacionaban con el mejoramiento de estudiantes universitarios en una prueba sobre dos temas gramaticales. Se seleccionaron tres grupos: los estudiantes en el grupo de instrucción implícita no tuvieron ninguna instrucción explícita en los dos tópicos que se enseñaron a través de

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actividades significativas y contextualizadas en escucha, habla, lectura y escritura. El grupo de instrucción explícita tomó el curso regular ofrecido por la institución más actividades y ejercicios extras con el propósito de practicar los temas gramaticales enseñados; y el grupo de control tomó únicamente el curso regular. Los resultados indican que los estudiantes en el grupo de enseñanza explícita lograron resultados significativamente más altos que los estudiantes en el grupo de enseñanza implícita y que los estudiantes del grupo de control.

Palabras claves: Input-Gramatical, Gramática-Implicita, Gramática-Explícita, Enseñanza-Gramática, Investigación-Cuantitativa

INTRODUCTION

Grammar has been and is at the core of the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) and the way it is taught depends on the methodologies and approaches teachers make use of. There is perhaps no subject more hotly debated by language teachers than the place of grammar in language teaching; it has been in and out as the trend of fashion has fluctuated back and forth. Some second or foreign language professionals do not consider grammar to be an important element in second or foreign language learning or teaching. They believe that grammar can be learned holistically through context without explicit instruction in grammar. Krashen (1992: 410) claims that “the effect of grammar is peripheral and fragile” and that “direct instruction on specific rules has a measurable impact on tests that focus the performer on form, but the effect is short-lived”.

Others believe that grammar is the only substance in second or foreign language teaching. They would equate language learning and teaching with grammar.

Learning a foreign or second language is learning the grammar of that language. The traditional grammar-translation method is a typical example. If you can translate the target language according to its grammar into your own language, you are learning that language.

But there is a consensus that grammar input given by teachers to learners could influence L2 acquisition. The counterpart notion concerning the learner is that those learners who initiate interactions will derive more benefit from the input than if they are exposed to the input in a more indirect manner. Furthermore, grammar input not only can be explicit or implicit but also needs to be comprehensible. ‘Comprehensible input’ is a term popularised by Krashen. It refers to the fact that not all the target language to which foreign language learners are exposed is understandable: Only some of the language they hear makes sense to them. Input to the learners is the result of unplanned factors as well as the planned implementation of the syllabus. Research theory and practical experience all point to the fact that input is crucial to language

learning. 'Input' refers to the language which the learners hear (or read) -that is, the language samples to which they are exposed.

Conceiving second language acquisition without input in some way or other is impossible. Models of language acquisition differ in the type of input which is regarded as most facilitative to second language development. On the one hand, induction models (Krashen, 1985) see acquisition as a result of informal, message-focused input and bring into prominence the role of implicit acquisition of a second language. On the other hand, instructional models (Ellis, 1990) emphasise the role of explicit acquisition and therefore formal instruction as an important part in second language acquisition.

Implicit and explicit acquisition, as McLaughlin (1990) has indicated, are controversial constructs in the theoretical study of foreign language (FL) teaching and learning, as are other terms such as conscious, unconscious, incidental, intentional, deductive, and inductive, mainly because they refer to language learning strategies and mental operations that cannot easily be identified.

Implicit acquisition of grammatical structures is a language learning process in which grammatical principles and lexical understanding are acquired by the language learner through experience with the second language (Krashen, 1981).

A number of premises underlie the instructional strategy of implicit language acquisition of which the following three are

the most frequently cited. First, according to Winitz and Reeds (1975), thorough, accurate and comprehensive knowledge of grammatical principles is achieved best through implicit language acquisition. This claim is made because the grammatical rules in introductory FL textbooks are regarded as incomplete and inaccurate as well as their use as comprehensive statements regarding the linguistic knowledge a speaker must know in order to speak a foreign language. These limited sets of rules contain only a small number of the large number of grammatical rules that linguistic research has uncovered. Second, the grammatical principles of an FL require knowledge of semantics and pragmatics. Textbook descriptions of grammatical rules are primarily restricted to statements of syntax and morphology. The grammars of semantics and pragmatics are usually limited in scope and respectively provide the basis for the interpretation of sentences and for the understanding of discourse principles. Nonetheless, there is support for the position that semantics and pragmatics can be acquired through experience with L2, generally in the context of communicative situations (Loveday, 1982). Third, psycholinguistic investigation has indicated that language acquisition involves the use of lexico-grammatical strategies that do not directly correspond to the grammatical principles of a language (Taylor and Taylor, 1990). These strategies are presumably put into operation by language learners without their conscious awareness and without an explicit understanding of when and under what circumstances they are used.

Over the past two decades there has been an open discussion about the role of teaching grammar and the main focus of L2 instructional research has shifted from whether or not instruction makes a difference to what types of instruction are most effective for fostering second or foreign language learning in formal contexts. The debate has led to theoretical issues such as how grammar should be taught: implicit or explicit grammar (called by Scott (1989) implicit exemplification and explicit explanation respectively). McDermott (1999: 32) points out that “implicit teaching is not or at least should not be the opposite of implicit learning. The teacher should know what s/he is doing and why, and s/he should remember what s/he did so s/he can either repeat or avoid it the next time. Implicit teaching is simply providing opportunities for language use without any attention to form”. In relation to explicit teaching, he states that it “is teaching that overtly points out some feature of the language”. In DeKeyser’s words (1994: 188), implicit teaching of grammar means that no rules are formulated; explicit means rules are formulated (either by the teacher or the student, either before or after examples/practice).

It is worth noting that, according to Ellis (1997: 84), “explicit and implicit instructions are not to be confused with explicit and implicit learning”. On the contrary, explicit and implicit instruction means it involves intentional learning on the part of learners –they are aware they are learning grammar. Consequently, both explicit and implicit instruction imply explicit learning –while implicit learning ascribes to

‘learning that takes place without intention and, possibly, without awareness’.

On the one hand, support of the implicit method of grammar instruction has been made on the basis that the development of the grammar competency needed to communicate effectively –from exposure to comprehensible, meaningful linguistic input- is done naturally. Krashen’s distinction between learning (a conscious process) and acquisition (a subconscious process) provides the basis for his theory of implicit teaching strategies. He states that “second language acquisition can take place in the classroom without any explicit study of grammar if the students are exposed to enough comprehensible input” and adds that “the conscious study of grammar does not aid in the natural acquisition process” (Scott, 1989, p. 14).

Winitz (1996) conducted a study to investigate whether the methodologies of implicit and explicit language instruction make a difference in the identification of grammatically well-formed sentences. One hundred and thirty-nine college students enrolled in the first semester of college Spanish at a university in the U.S.A. participated in the study. The subjects were divided into two groups: the implicit instructional group and the explicit instructional group. The former, comprised of 67 students, was taught the comprehension of Spanish sentences through the use of pictures, gestures, context-based materials and Total Physical Response activities; the latter, with 72 students, was instructed in the grammar-translation approach wherein explicit

statements of the rules of grammar were taught. The data analysis was based on a grammaticality judgement test administered in the final week of the first semester of the course and on the students' high school experience in Spanish. Overall, the results show that students in the implicit instruction group achieved significantly higher average scores than students in the explicit instruction group on this test. Also, it was found that students in the implicit group who had had high school Spanish did better on the test.

Krashen (1999) reviews some studies (Master, 1994; Leeman et al., 1995; Robinson, 1995, 1997; De Graff, 1997; Manley and Calk, 1997) claiming to show an effect for grammar and that grammar study is good for students. He raises some objections to these studies on the impact of formal instruction. Firstly, all the subjects were experienced ESL learners such as intermediate or advanced foreign language university students. Secondly, some implicit groups doubtfully had an acquisition-rich environment during their instruction and some others were focused on form. Finally, subjects were focused on form on all tests. He concludes that these studies "consistently show that more instruction result in, at best, modest increases in consciously-learned competence" (p. 245) and that "predictably, more focus on form and more information presented about rules result in more conscious learning".

On the other hand, there is also support for the explicit method of grammar instruction as Ellis (1994, 1997) has pointed out. He states that grammar

teaching is more than "providing learners with opportunities to produce target structure, initially under controlled conditions, and, then, increasingly in free or communicative activities" (Ellis, 1993, p. 69).

Scott's (1989) study compares implicit and explicit grammar teaching strategies with thirty-four advanced French conversation learners studying French as a foreign language at a university in the U.S.A. The class of students was divided into two groups and both groups were exposed to both implicit and explicit teaching conditions of two target structures, relative pronouns and subjunctive –both form and usage. The students taught through the explicit method heard rules and example sentences of relative pronouns while the students taught through the implicit method heard a story which contained the same grammar structure present in the text naturally and frequently, and heard ten times more examples than the explicit grammar group. For the second target structure, subjunctive, the group taught under the implicit condition was taught this time under explicit conditions, and vice versa. All the students in both groups were given a written and oral pre-test and post-test covering the relative pronouns or the subjunctive. Overall, the results show that the students under the explicit teaching condition performed better than the implicit teaching condition group. On the written section of the test, the students under the explicit teaching condition performed better than the ones under the implicit method, $t(33) = 1.74, p < .05$. However, on the oral section of the test there was no significant difference in performance; the students performed

equally well under both conditions, $t(33) = 1.05$, $p > .05$. Scott herself explains that the differences between the written and oral performance are related to the students' concentration in both the implicit and the explicit teaching conditions. Students under the implicit method concentrated more on the content of the message they heard while the students under the explicit one concentrated on the form. However, she adds that the students will focus their attention on content of the message they hear regardless of whether it is a story or grammar rules.

Scott (1990) replicated her experiment described above but, in order to provide new empirical data, some changes were implemented. Thirty-four advanced students of French as a foreign language at the same university in the U.S.A. were divided into two groups and were taught two target grammar structures, relative pronouns and subjunctive. As was done in the former experiment, both groups were exposed to implicit and explicit teaching conditions. During the first part of the experiment, one group was exposed to the implicit teaching condition and the other group to the explicit one; and for the second part, the former was exposed to the explicit teaching condition and the latter to the implicit one. Two changes in both the teaching and testing procedures were made. The change in teaching procedure involved telling the implicit method group that they were hearing grammar structures in context—episodes full of relative pronouns for the first part of the experiment and episodes using plenty of subjunctive structures for the second part of the experiment. The change in testing

procedure involved eliminating the oral exam in both the pre-test and the post-test (for the difference between the pre-test and the post-test was not significant in Scott's first experiment) and incorporating both convergent and divergent items such as multiple choice, completion exercises and open-ended questions. The results of this study show almost identical results to Scott's first experiment, and demonstrate that when explicit teaching of grammar is used in the classroom, students' performance is significantly better. Scott (1990: 785) points out that these data also "provide basis for continuing to develop explicit grammar teaching which are creative and efficient and which prepare students".

Similar results to the above are shown by DeKeyser's (1994) exploratory study under laboratory conditions which aimed at clarifying the role of explicit teaching of different kinds of rules. He tried out three hypotheses on six FL undergraduate learners, three for the explicit and three for the implicit conditions who were administered a judgement and a production test. The results show that the first hypothesis (prototypes are harder to learn than categorical rules) was supported by two of the explicit subjects; and for the other ones, there was no difference between prototypical and categorical rules. The second hypothesis (and the most significant piece of evidence for the present study in which explicit learning is better than implicit learning for categorical rules) was fully confirmed: The three subjects in the explicit teaching condition did significantly better than the implicit group. And the third hypothesis (implicit learning is at least as good as explicit for prototypical rules) was

confirmed; however, all subjects performed poorly on the prototypes. In general, the study supports the idea that learners do better when grammar is taught under explicit conditions. Due to the bias and limitations of this pilot study, DeKeyser (1995) conducted a full-scale study with 61 college students, in which feedback was given during the learning sessions in order to increase students' performance. Moreover, explicit knowledge of grammar was formally tested. Overall, the results show that explicit-deductive learning was more effective than implicit-inductive learning for the acquisition of categorical rules.

Green and Hecht (1992) refer to one of their former studies where they looked at the grammatical competence and performance of learners and native speakers of English. The results show that FL learners achieved a good level of competence –understood as the degree of accuracy achieved by learners when their attention was focused on form – and that they did better than the group of native speakers, while their performance – the degree of accuracy achieved when the focus was on the transmission of meaning – was not as good as the native speaker group. For their current investigation, Green and Hecht (1992) replicated their former study but, realising the German learners of English as a foreign language were bringing conscious rules into play, they also looked at the rules themselves and not only at the products of them, by asking learners to make explicit the rules they were using or thought they were using. The results show that in 96 per cent of the possible cases, the native speakers of English produced the correction anticipated, as was expected. In relation to

one of the expectations of Green and Hecht's study, native speakers are worse at rules than FL learners. It was found that the former were less successful at formulating rules (42 per cent) than the latter (46 per cent), though not strikingly so. However, despite the slight difference, this piece of evidence lends support to the idea that explicit grammar does help FL learners.

Norris and Ortega (2000), in their research synthesis and quantitative meta-analysis on the effectiveness of L2 instruction of 77 experimental and quasi-experimental study report publications published between 1980 and 1998, found that explicit types of instruction are more effective than implicit types.

In conclusion, research provides ground to the voices who advocates either the implicit or the explicit instruction of grammar. There is no debate as to whether or not it is necessary to teach grammar but how it should be taught. There is not only enough evidence which supports either the implicit or the explicit teaching of grammar, but also enough scholars who advocate both as the most effective way of enhancing and improving FL learning.

METHOD

Teachers and Subjects

Prior to the semester course work, two teachers from the department of languages at Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga, Colombia, with an experience of about 15 years in EFL teaching, decided to use the implicit and the explicit system of instruction

in their regular courses. These instructors, who were non-native English speakers and held a bachelor's degree in language teaching (Spanish, English, and French) and an M. Ed., also took part in the planning of the activities and the designing of the class materials and tests for the experiment.

Sixty-six students aged 18 to 20 from three intermediate EFL classes during the second semester of 2003 took part in the experiment. The course is available to students who have completed two previous courses –beginners and pre-intermediate.

Target Structures

Two target structures were chosen for their level of difficulty as well as for their difference: If-Clauses: Real Conditions and Past Simple -Past Continuous, both form and usage.

Procedure

Three groups of students in pre-intermediate EFL classes were taught by a different instructor. Each group was taught three sessions of two hours each for each one of the two target structures. The second structure was taught four weeks after the first one. The students involved in the research were not aware of the nature of the experiment. There was a pre-test (Appendix 1) and a post-test (Appendix 2) for each target structure. All the students in the three groups were given the same pre-test before the teaching of each target structure. Following the intervention, the students were given the same post-test.

One group, 24 students total, was exposed to an implicit teaching methodology during the teaching of both structures. The course content consisted of material specially designed for this experiment by the researcher and the two teachers in charge of the implicit and the explicit instruction groups. The target structures were taught through meaningful and contextualised listening, speaking, reading and writing activities. No explanation of or reference to the structure was made. The students were given the pre-test and the post-test on each structure.

The second group, 22 students in all, was exposed to an explicit teaching methodology during the teaching of both structures. The course content consisted of the current textbook selected by the language department at the university for the regular courses. Both the students' book and the workbook were used for the teaching of each of the target structures. Additional exercises and drills on the structures were given to the students in class in order to practise them. The students were also given the pre-test and post-test on each structure.

The third group, 20 students, was the control group. The students in this class were taught the regular course at this university. The course content consisted of the current textbook selected for the courses by the language department. Both the students' book and the workbook were used for the teaching of each of the target structures. No additional exercises or drills were given to the students. The students were also given the pre-test and the post-

test on each structure. The instructor of this group did not take part either in the planning or the designing of the study and the material used for the implicit and the explicit conditions. She was informed of the experiment and asked to participate as the control group instructor.

FINDINGS

Un-paired, two-tailed t-tests were used to compare the mean gain scores of the three groups for the If-Clauses: Real Conditions and Past Simple -Past Continuous under the implicit, the explicit, and the control conditions.

Table 1 shows the raw score and gain score means for the If-Clauses: Real Conditions section of the experiment. The results of a two-tailed test show a statistically significant difference in performance of the three groups: The group under the explicit teaching condition performed better than both the group under the implicit teaching condition $t=2.8$, $p<.05$ and the control group $t=2.7$, $p<.05$. The group under the implicit teaching condition did not perform better than the control group.

Pre-test, post-test and gain score means for subjects on If-Clauses: Real Conditions tests under implicit, explicit, and control conditions:

Pre-test			Post-test			Gain		
Imp	exp.	contr.	Imp.	exp.	contr.	Imp.	exp.	contr.
2.5	2.5	2.7	2.7	3.7	2.8	.14	1.2	.13

Table 1. Pre-test, post-test and gain score means for subjects on If-Clauses: Real Conditions Tests

Table 2 shows the raw score and gain score means for the Past Simple -Past Continuous section of the experiment. The results of a two-tailed do not show a statistically significant difference in performance of the three groups, being $p>.05$. Only the group under explicit teaching condition did better than the group

under the implicit teaching condition at the 0.1 level, $t=1.6$, $p<.1$.

Pre-test, post-test and gain score means for subjects on Past Simple -Past Continuous tests under implicit, explicit, and control conditions:

Pre-test			Post-test			Gain		
Imp	exp.	contr.	Imp.	exp.	contr.	Imp.	exp.	contr.
3.1	2.6	2.6	3.1	3.4	3.2	-.06	.77	.65

Table 2. Pre-test, post-test and gain score means for subjects on Past Simple - Past Continuous Tests

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the experimental stage of this study was to investigate whether the methodologies of implicit and explicit language instruction account for the improvement of university students on a performance test on two grammar topics.

Overall, the findings indicate that at the end of the experiment, students in the explicit instruction group achieved significantly higher average scores than both the students in the implicit instruction group and the students in the control group on the performance tests. This demonstrates that when teachers use explicit grammar teaching strategies in the classroom, the students' performance is significantly better. The difference in grammar teaching instruction has theoretical and practical implications. First, the difference in performance among the three groups provides indirect evidence that language instructional procedures of the implicit and explicit instruction result in the use of different language processes. Second, the better performance of the students in the explicit instruction group suggests that explicit instructional strategies are very important in the development of foreign language educational programmes. Also, these results support the value of explicit grammar instruction and suggest that the role of explicit grammar teaching strategies in the classroom has to be re-considered and re-defined.

In relation to the Colombian EFL context, grammar teaching still remains a debate. Also, there are many issues for teachers to consider in an attempt to render the

teaching of grammar both more learner-centred and more effective, not least their own role in the choice, modification and pacing of tasks. Teachers should retain an eclectic and open-minded approach, whereby, with a degree of experimentation and sensitivity to and close vigilance of their students, they can attempt to create the best possible conditions in which accuracy and fluency of language use can be developed simultaneously and complementarily.

Further study is needed in order to value the overall effectiveness of explicit instruction in the long term and to determine which kind of linguistic structures are more suitable to be taught under explicit or implicit conditions.

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APPENDIX 1: PRE-TEST**If-Clauses: Real Conditions**

Choose the correct word(s) to fill in the blank.

1. I _____ come to the university if I feel better today.
a. will be b. might c. am d. was
2. If there _____ a nuclear war, many people will die.
a. be b. is c. will be d. were
3. If a store is out of a sale item, you _____ get a rain check.
a. could have b. would c. were d. can
4. I don't answer the phone if I _____ in the shower.
a. were b. was c. am d. will be
5. _____ you see a red light, stop.
a. Even b. If c. Unless d. Were
6. If you don't do the homework, you _____ get a good grade.
a. wouldn't b. not c. won't d. weren't
7. I _____ my friend if I have some free time tonight.
a. call b. will call c. were called d. would call
8. If the weather _____ nice this weekend, I'll go to the park.
a. were b. will be c. is d. would be
9. If you are married, you probably _____ longer.
a. will live b. are live c. would have lived d. would be lived
10. I'll go to the library if the teacher _____ come tomorrow.
a. not b. wouldn't c. doesn't d. weren't

Past Simple - Past Continuous

Choose the correct word(s) to fill in the blank.

1. I was watching TV. I heard a knock on the door. When I heard the knock on the door, I _____ it.
a. open b. am opening c. opened d. was opening

2. Boris lost his wallet while he _____ through the park.
a. will be jogging b. was jogging c. jog d. were jogging
3. I _____ TV when Gina called last night. We talked for an hour.
a. watch b. watched c. was watching d. am watching
4. Mike was in his bedroom last night. He _____, so we needed to be quiet.
a. is sleeping b. sleeps c. slept d. was sleeping
5. Kate _____ an accident yesterday. She was standing at the corner where the accident happened.
a. saw b. see c. sees d. was seeing
6. Paul broke his arm while he _____ in the ocean yesterday.
a. swim b. was swimming c. were swimming d. was swimming
7. _____ the telephone ringing? I'm sorry but I didn't hear anything.
a. do b. did c. were d. was
8. While I _____ dinner last night, I burned my fingers.
a. cooking b. cook c. was cooking d. was cook
9. I _____ home at 10:00 p.m. My brother was playing his guitar.
a. arrived b. will arrive c. was arriving d. arrive
10. My cat jumped on the table while we _____ dinner.
a. eat b. were eating c. ate d. will eat

APPENDIX 2: POST-TEST

If-Clauses: Real Conditions

Choose the correct word(s) to fill in the blank.

1. We _____ late if you don't hurry.
a. will be b. were c. are d. would
2. If I _____ well tomorrow, I'll stay at home.
a. will feel b. didn't feel c. felt d. don't feel
3. We'll play tennis if it _____ tomorrow.
a. has rained b. doesn't rain c. will rain d. has been raining
4. I'm sure they'll understand if you _____ wear a coat.
a. have b. won't c. don't d. will be
5. If I can get a flight, I _____ fly home on Sunday.
a. will b. will have c. wasn't d. was
6. It _____ nice if you can come to the party.
a. wouldn't b. not c. won't d. will be
7. Have something to eat. If you _____ eat now, you'll be hungry later.
a. not b. will c. don't d. would
8. If I _____ you tomorrow, I'll phone you.
a. was seen b. will see c. won't see d. don't see
9. What _____ you do if you don't pass your examinations?
a. will b. are c. would d. were
10. If you _____ any problems, I'll try to help you.
a. has b. had c. have d. don't have

Choose the correct form of the verb

11. It will be difficult to find a hotel if _____ late.
a. we arrive b. we'll arrive c. we arrived d. we haven't arrived
12. _____ surprised if _____ married.
a. I'm b. they get c. I'll be d. they'll get

13. _____ to the party if _____ you?
a. Do you go b. Will you go c. they invite d. they'll invite

Past Simple - Past Continuous

Choose the correct word(s) to fill in the blank.

1. When we _____ out, it was raining.
a. go b. do go c. was d. went
2. _____ television when I phoned you?
a. will you watch b. you were watching c. were you watching d. you will watch
3. Jane wasn't at home when I went to see her. She _____.
a. was working b. does work c. will work d. has been working
4. The postman _____ while I was having breakfast.
a. come b. came c. doesn't come d. will come
5. We met Joan at the party. She _____ a red dress.
a. does wear b. wears c. will wear d. was wearing
6. The boys _____ a window when they were playing football.
a. break b. broken c. broke d. were broken
7. When the accident happened, Pat _____ fast.
a. not drive b. wasn't driving c. not driving d. drives
8. While I was doing my homework, my little sisters _____ in the back garden.
a. were playing b. played c. don't play d. play
9. I got up at 7 o'clock. The sun _____, so I _____ for a walk.
a. shines e. was going
b. was shining f. will go
c. will shine g. go
d. shone h. went