

## Perceptions of lecturers on grammar with regard to the four skills teaching

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### Abstract

With the rise of communicative approaches in modern educational systems, grammar teaching has started to be a controversial issue among researchers. Whether formal instruction of grammar is essential for learners to attain high levels of accuracy in the language learning process still remains as a subject to debate. Therefore, this paper focuses on the perceptions of in-service lecturers about grammar teaching, specifically about the effectiveness of grammatical accuracy on writing and speaking activities. Data were collected using a questionnaire which is adapted from Jean and Simard [*Foreign Language Annals*, 44(3), 2011] targeted the lecturers' beliefs and perceptions about the effectiveness of formal grammar instruction. This study result reveals that for lecturers, formal instruction of grammar is inevitable to attain a high proficiency level in writing activities. For speaking activities, however, lecturers do not think that grammar is an essential part of the language learning process.

**Keywords:** Grammar teaching, writing, speaking, perceptions of lecturers.

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## 1. Introduction

Current theories in language teaching such as Content and Language Integrated Learning view formal grammar teaching as a controversial issue. Although new approaches like communicative and task-based language teaching have attempted to replace the traditional models which focus on grammar without relevant context like grammar-translation method with meaningful exercises which provide contextualising; in practice, especially with the adult learners, it is not easy to contextualise the grammatical item. While there are some researchers like Cullen (2008) claiming that 'Without grammar the learner is forced to rely exclusively on lexis and the immediate context, combined with gestures, intonation and other prosodic and non-verbal features to communicate his/her intended meanings', there are some others like Nunan (1998) who claim that grammar should be taught in a meaningful context like reading and writing activities or 'tasks that dramatise the relationship between grammatical items and the discoursal contexts'. Therefore, in formal grammar teaching context, lecturers' perceptions and ideas consist an important part of teaching activities. Thus, although this study sets sight on the perceptions of lecturers on grammar with regard to the teaching of four skills, which are notably reading, writing, speaking and listening, the main focus of the research is on writing and speaking.

The literature shows that grammar teaching is regarded as an essential part of language teaching. However, in this case, the question of how to teach grammar arises. From this point of view, this study focuses on the questions below regarding the perceptions and ideas of language lecturers. Therefore, this study attempts to answer the main research question; 'Is grammar teaching important for teachers in the learning of English as a foreign language?' and analyses the data gained from the sub-questions to shed light on the issue clearly

1. Is grammar teaching important for students to achieve high accuracy level in writing activities in English?
2. Is grammar teaching important for students to attain a high proficiency level in speaking activities in English?
3. Is grammar teaching effective or motivating?
4. What are the lecturers' beliefs on the effectiveness of the formal teaching of grammar in the courses?

The study aims to define the most effective and practical way to teach grammar with regard to the perceptions of lecturers answering the question of how to teach grammar and analyses the data quantitatively in consideration of the statements of the questionnaire applied to the lectures.

## 2. Literature review

It is difficult to discuss perceptions of lecturers about grammar before explaining the importance of grammar for linguists. The function of grammar, for some researchers such as Harmer and Rutherford, is to convey messages in a correct way. Harmer (1987) states that 'Grammar is the way in which words change themselves and group together to make sentences. The grammar of a language is what happens to words when they become plural or negative or what word order is used when we make questions or join two clauses to make one sentence'. Rutherford's (1987) definition of grammar states that grammar is a fundamental part of any language teaching programme. Therefore, ideas about the concept of 'grammar' itself may change in accordance with the perceptions of linguists about language teaching.

Furthermore, there are various ideas about grammar teaching. Although some language researchers (Prabhu, 1987) think that for language learners, meaning should be more emphasised than the form and the instructors should teach the language in order to convey meaning and for communication, some others (Dickins & Woods, 1988) think that being competent about the grammatical structures of a specific language is very critical because grammatical competence is

acknowledged equal to being fluent in communicative skills. When these ideas are adapted to language teaching environments, it seems that one of the reasons to teach grammar is its capacity to make learners understand the existence of language, which intends to make linguistic production more practical (Azar, 2007). In terms of enabling skills, learning correct structures in grammar helps the learners develop reading, writing, communication and other skills. Without understanding correct grammatical structures, people are unable to communicate, convey meaning or understand through the pieces that they write, read, speak or listen (Savage, Bitterline & Price, 2010). Learning the grammatical structures of a specific language may be acknowledged as a motivator and key to speaking and understanding that language (Savage et al., 2010). So, for most of the researchers, grammar is the key point in teaching any language to reach high accuracy and fluency in other skills such as reading and writing. This priority is re-emphasised by Radilova (1998) who notes that 'Knowledge of grammar is the central area of the language system around which the other areas resolve; however, important are the other components of language may be in themselves, they are connected to each other through grammar'. In addition to shedding light on the way to interpret the perceptions about grammar teaching, the research also show that 'The way teachers perceive their own way clearly influence what they do in the classroom although (a) how this actually occurs may vary among teachers and (b) teachers' self-perception, is but one of a range of other factors which shape their practices in teaching grammar' (Borg, 2001). In that point, it is clearly seen that all teaching practices are based on the lectures' perception of grammar and the relation of grammatical rules with other skills to be mastered to learn a language accurately.

In that point, the question of how to teach grammar arises as it is widely acknowledged that grammar teaching is a vital step for language proficiency at any level of any skill. Supporting the effectiveness of formal instruction in grammar teaching, Nassaji and Fotos (2004) have listed the following arguments from the literature:

1. 'Some researchers, such as Schmidt (1990), proved that 'noticing' is one of the necessities for learning to take place' while this way may vary according to the personal views of lecturers as the idea which was put forth by Nunan (1998) asserts that '...specifically written texts and dialogues, drills and deductive teaching by the teacher, have no place in the grammar class. What we need is an appropriate balance between exercises that help learners come to grips with grammatical forms and tasks for exploring the use of those forms to communicate effectively'.
2. 'Some researchers, such as Pienemann (1984), found that grammar instruction can accelerate the process of learning some structures'.
3. 'Swain (1985) concluded that the most effective way to improve the ability to use grammar accurately is formal instruction'.
4. 'During the last 20 years, considerable empirical classroom teaching research has demonstrated that grammar instruction effects SLA'.

These research studies, perceptions and the different conclusions about grammar teaching have some clues for this study to get a clear understanding of different perceptions on grammar teaching and its impacts on different skills to be learnt in the process of language learning.

### **3. Methodology**

The participants for this study were 34 Turkish EFL lecturers from different universities. Their experience range was between 1 and 16 years. Thirty of the participants are female and four of them are male.

A questionnaire which was adapted from a study called *Grammar Teaching and Learning in L2: Necessary but Boring?* by Jean and Simard (2011) including 13 Likert-scale items was employed as a data collection tool for this research. The questionnaire was implemented through an online survey website to get a higher participation level for a deeper understanding of the issue.

In order to examine the ideas and perceptions of lecturers about the influence of grammar on four-skill teaching, the questionnaire included items about the ideas and perceptions of lecturers and their own practices of grammar teaching.

At the first step of the study, the questionnaire was implemented to five university lecturers and results were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Firstly, the reliability of the adapted instrument was calculated. The results indicated an acceptable degree of reliability (0.450) for the questionnaire.

#### **4. Results**

This study was an attempt to examine the perceptions of language lecturers about grammar teaching and its effects on four skill teaching, especially the writing and speaking. It is hypothesised that grammar is an essential part of the language for students to attain high levels of accuracy, especially in writing and speaking. Guided by this hypothesis, the study was designed to find out the ideas of lecturers about grammar teaching and whether the formal teaching of grammar was effective in terms of teaching other skills in language teaching.

The study mainly focused on the question of whether grammar teaching is important to acquire high proficiency in speaking and writing for lecturers or not.

The related items show that grammar is not an important issue for most of the lecturers (58.8%) who favour high proficiency in speaking.

However, this is not the case for writing, as for most of the participants (55.9%); grammar is an essential part of learning writing in ELT classes.

In addition, this study examined whether the lecturers see grammar as a motivating factor in formal teaching. According to many lecturers (47%), the learners are highly motivated and grammar is an effective and motivating factor in language teaching.

To get a clear understanding about the perceptions of lecturers, it is vital to highlight the fact that it is not important for the participants (73.5%) that their students' practicing English grammar through specific grammar exercises, namely according to lecturers students may have grammatical exercises integrated with other skills although the students are supposed to learn the grammatical rules (76.4%).

Furthermore, for 79.4% of the participants in the study support the idea that the learners do not perceive it difficult to understand the grammatical rules. Thus, they believe that for their students, understanding and internalising grammatical rules are an easy part of formal lectures.

Moreover, the participants in the study seem to have their own way in grammar teaching according to their student profile as they see both inductive (91.2%) and deductive (64.7) ways as effective means of grammar teaching. However, it is seen that 70.6% of the lecturers think that mechanical-type of exercises (drills) are not useful to get the students to practice grammatical rules and for the participants, drills are not interesting at all.

Lastly and interestingly, 85.3% of the lecturers believe that creating lesson plans which emphasise grammatical aspects of the target language is an effective component of the language teaching process.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Based on the insights gained from the studies previously conducted about the ideas and feelings of lecturers on grammar teaching, this study aimed at examining the perceptions of lecturers on grammar teaching with regard to four skills. It was also to find out how these perceptions affect the way the lecturers choose to teach grammar. Based on the findings of the study, it is possible to say that lecturers have different perceptions about grammar teaching and these perceptions affect the way they teach grammar in general.

First of all, the results indicate that the lecturers believe that their students are highly motivated to learn grammar and to acquire grammatical rules. Although learning grammatical rules is seen essential for writing proficiency in English, the participants assume that teaching grammar is not an effective way to attain high levels of proficiency in speaking English.

Secondly, it is clearly deduced from the study that the perceptions of lecturers about grammar effect their teaching method and techniques. Thus, the study supports the idea that lecturers use both inductive and deductive ways as mostly it is argued that the students need to learn metalinguistic knowledge, as well as practicing these rules while speaking or writing. This fact indicates that teachers employ inductive and deductive ways according to their perceptions of grammar teaching or their students' profile.

Thirdly, lesson plans are important steps for an effective language teaching programme; hence, lecturers assert that grammar should be placed in the lesson plans and grammar teaching should be seen as a key point for other skills in language teaching.

Lastly, the results discussed above showed that grammar is an indispensable part of language teaching for any skill in English. Therefore, this makes grammar an essential part of formal education and lesson plans developed for the acquisition of different skills. Although grammar is not a fundamental part of speaking activities in English, it is to be included in writing activities for an influential language teaching programme. Thus, the results suggest that lecturers include grammar, especially in pre-writing sessions to teach writing in English. To sum up, this study indicated that grammar teaching and its effects on four skills are the topics that deserve attention in the field of EFL and the results defined new directions for further experimental research.

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