

**EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Grammar Instruction in Oman:
Challenges and Recommendations**

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Abstract

Teachers of English and other concerned educators try hard to make their students be fluent and accurate users of English. In order to achieve that aim, they should ensure that they have students who rarely or never make language errors. During their studying period, students must see the difficulties, challenges, and rewards of using the language correctly and accurately. They have to obtain a better understanding of how language is structured and interconnected logically. More importantly, EFL teachers and other educators should enhance

the idea of how students can use correct English in their lives inside and outside classrooms. The main purpose of this study is to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions pertaining to grammar teaching, correction of students' grammatical mistakes and the challenges that are prevalent when teaching grammar in the Omani context. In addition, the study advocates some practical recommendations to EFL teachers, supervisors, teacher trainers, curriculum developers and assessment officers ascribed to grammar teaching.

Keywords: Grammar Instructions, Observations, Teacher Perceptions, Teaching Grammar

Introduction

The study of the teachers' perceptions on the role of grammar instruction is significant as teaching grammar has been an arguable issue and until now there is no clear cut, correct guideline that teachers can follow easily (Ellis, 2008). Besides, studying teachers' perceptions is crucial as it explores their practices, which in turn affect learners' engagement and learning process. Various studies have investigated the effects of grammar instruction on the second and foreign language learning process (Al-Qutaiti & Ahmad, 2018; Farrell, 2018; Harmer, 2007; Scrivener, 2005). Some of these researchers believe that grammar instruction is essential to young learners (Higgs, 1985; Valette, 1991). However, Ellis (2008), and Long and Robinson (1998) believe that grammar instruction to young learners should be taught implicitly as it is not important to be introduced explicitly at the early stages. In Oman, the Ministry of Education frequently develops its English textbooks, but learners still lack basic English skills and they make many grammatical mistakes in their writing and speaking utterances. For instance, Al-Barwani (2002) studied the factors that negatively impact on students' performance at Sultan Qaboos University as perceived by college teachers and one of the factors was "low English language proficiency" which had a mean of 3.64 and standard

deviation of 1.30. The low level was because the type of education that school students had. Later, the Ministry of Education designed a new curriculum called “English for me” in which the inductive approach was used to develop students’ grammar, yet a study that was carried out in 2007 to evaluate grade 7 students’ speaking skill and grammar acquisition revealed that the students made a lot of grammatical mistakes. Therefore, the only way to examine the problems of grammar teaching and why students are feeble in grammar is to elicit the teachers’ perceptions of teaching it and the causes of such weakness. In other words, it is significant to investigate the teachers’ perceptions of why students cannot implement correctly the grammatical rules that they have studied in their real communication. Learners appear to fathom what their EFL teachers want to emphasize when they teach grammar points. However, they have not reached the level where they can use the language automatically without having to think about grammar yet.

Statement of the Problem

Many Omani students show understanding when they are taught grammar (Al-maqbali, Mirza & Al-Shahraki, 2019; Al-Qutaiti & Ahmad, 2018). However, when learners are asked to write acceptable paragraphs or speak fluently, they pause several times to think on how to write or say the sentences. Then, they produce paragraphs or say utterances full of grammatical, unexplainable errors (Al-Mekhlafi & Naji, 2013; Al-Qutaiti & Ahmad, 2018). One of the researchers has been a teacher for six years and then a supervisor of English at the Ministry of Education for ten years and he noticed that Omani students understand the grammatical items when they are explained, but they cannot use them correctly in different contexts. In spite of the constant, consistent changes in the Omani curriculum of English as a foreign language, this problem still prevails.

The Purpose of the Study

This study aims to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions in teaching grammar and in correcting students' grammatical mistakes. In addition, this study seeks to explore EFL teachers' perceptions in finding the causes of students' weaknesses in grammar in Omani schools. It also aims to examine the problems that the teachers consider as prevalent when teaching and assessing students' grammar. Moreover, the study attempts to find practical solutions for these problems.

Rationale of the study

Investigating EFL teachers' perceptions about grammar teaching and the problems teachers consider as prevalent ones when teaching and assessing grammatical items inside the English classroom may give EFL teachers, supervisors, curriculum developers, assessment officers and researchers an insight of the actual problems that teachers encounter. It is broadly recognized that understanding the problems facilitates in tackling them effectively and efficaciously. In addition, this study offers an opportunity for teachers to understand the problems and reflect on them critically.

Research Questions

The problem of this study can be formulated in terms of the following research questions:

1. What should be the balance of practice to presentation in grammar instruction?
2. What are teachers' perceptions in teaching grammar?
3. What are teachers' perceptions in correcting students' grammar?
4. What are the causes of students' weaknesses in grammar?

5. What are the problems related to grammar instruction that EFL teachers think prevalent?

Significance of the Study

This study may:

1. Draw the attention of decision makers at the Ministry of Education, curriculum designers, assessment officers, supervisors, teachers to the problems that teachers encounter when teaching and assessing the students' grammatical items.
2. Assist EFL teachers in overcoming these problems by providing some practical recommended solutions.

An Overview and Different Views of Grammar Instruction

The conception of grammar is seen differently by different schools of linguists. For instance, according to the traditional grammarians, grammar it is a set of rules; whereas grammar to the structuralisms is the study of how sentences are arranged and formed. However, the transformational supporters regard grammar as the rules that generate infinite sentences and help speakers to understand utterances they have heard of; while to some exponents of the communicative approach, grammar is the functions and notions of language as opposed to structural patterns (Giovanelli, 2015).

Whatever the concept has been adopted and followed, grammar is the skeleton of each language and it is very significant for language learners (Crystal, 2004; Lobeck & Denham, 2013). That is because grammar is the element that makes meaning to the language use. Thornbury (2007) defines grammar as a description of the rules for forming sentences, including an account to the meanings that these forms impart and grammar adds meanings that are not easily obtained from the immediate context. Scrivener (2005) confirms that grammar is the learner's internal database as to what are possible or impossible sentences.

Many various grammar theories have emerged since the 1950s when Chomsky started talking about the innate structure that everyone has had and which aids learners to produce limitless number of new sentences similar to the learnt grammatical rules.

Many language teaching methods and theories have appeared, followed, discussed, believed and/ or rejected (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). They vary in terms of their emphasis on teaching grammar. The first one was Grammar-Translation method that depended heavily on teaching grammar explicitly and deductively. On the contrary, the second method, which was called the direct method, rejected explicit grammar teaching. It argues that learners can naturally pick up the language as they hear it from their teachers. A third method was Audiolingual-ism which stemmed from behaviorism theory. The exponents of this method claimed that English can be learned by forming habits through drills. Therefore, according to this method, repeated drills are the best way to learn its grammar. According to Benseler and Schultz (1980), the role of grammar instruction in this method is little. Later, communicative language teaching (CLT) developed in the 1970s suggested that students could learn the language without directly teaching them its grammar. However, the CLT approach did not reject grammar instruction at all. Regardless its advantages, it suffers from some shortcomings. For example, communicatively-taught grammar does not look systematic or coherent as it is limited to functions of the language. Also, it needs competent teachers who can create appropriate communicative situations to provide students with chances to practice the grammar learnt.

There are two dominating approaches of teaching grammar: a deductive approach and an inductive approach. The former starts a grammar lesson with the presentation of grammar rules and followed by examples in which a grammatical rule is applied (Harmer, 2007). The latter commences with some examples from which the grammatical rules are inferred. Many educators and language specialists encourage EFL teachers to use the inductive approach

because it calls for discovery learning and it challenges the students' abilities in a more meaningful way (Al-Qutaiti & Ahmad, 2018). Kumaravadivelu (2001) points out that using the inductive approach activates the learners' intuitive heuristics largely. He argues that regardless the approach the teacher may adopt s/he should create a rich linguistic environment in the classroom in order that learners discover the linguistic system by themselves.

In recent years, some research has led to the adoption of a new classification of grammar teaching, based on the distinction between focus on forms and focus on meaning approaches (Ellis, 2008; Long & Robinson, 1998). Burgess and Etherington (2002) argue that few dispute that the teaching and learning with focus on form is invaluable if not indispensable nowadays. Scrivener (2005) points out that teachers should follow certain steps in order to make their students master grammatical items. First, they ought to expose them to the grammatical points and then design tasks to make them notice and understand those specific items. Then, they allow the learners try them out and provide them with chances to practice the learnt items. After that, they should aid their learners to use the new language when speaking and writing. Finally, the teachers should help learners to remember those forms through revision.

Teachers' Perceptions of Grammar Instruction

It has been mentioned that studying EFL teachers' perceptions is very vital. They determine teachers' willingness to experiment new approaches and this affects the type of teaching they may provide (Borg, 2013, 2018; Farrell, 2018). Research has compared between the experienced teachers and less experienced ones (Ellis, 2008). For example, Richards (2013) found that experienced language teachers involved in more improvisational teaching than inexperienced ones (Borg, 2018). This is true as teachers get older, they reflect

upon their decisions and practice (Borg, 2013; Richards, 2004). As a result, they become wiser and proactive on their teaching practices. There is a paucity of research on teachers' perceptions of grammar instruction (Basturkmen, 2012). Burgess and Etheington (2002) implemented a questionnaire to find out the beliefs about grammar and grammar teaching held by forty eight teachers of English for academic purposes in British universities. They found out that grammar is significant and it ought to be taught explicitly at least sometimes. Some research also suggests that teachers need to consider their students' preferences in their decision making around grammar teaching (Birch, 2014; Borg, 2013, Nurusus; 2015). Wenden (1986) suggests that EFL teachers should discover what their students have known, in order to supply students with more meaningful, communicative activities. Schulz (2001) also states that eliciting teachers' beliefs aids to have better understanding of their practices in the classrooms. Kumaravadivelu (1994), and also Farrell (2016) point out that attitude is one of the potential sources of matches and mismatches between the teachers' intention and learners' interpretations.

Methodology

This study is a mix of qualitative and quantitative study in which questionnaires were distributed to the respondents and observations were made during the teaching of process of respondents in class.

Sample population

The sample population of this study consisted of twenty one teachers teaching from grade 1-12 in Batinah North governorate in Oman. Their teaching experiences range from 3-25 years. Seventeen male teachers and four female teachers. All of them hold BA in teaching English from Sultan Qaboos University.

Observations

Observations were done on six teachers to scrutinize their teaching grammar practices and to observe how much time they give to their learners to practise the new learnt grammatical items. All these teachers teach basic students from grades 5 to 10. Four of them were male and two were female teachers.

Observations were conducted to draw some statements that could be utilized in developing questionnaire items later. The direct objective of the observations was to answer the first research question, “What should be the balance of practice to presentation in grammar instruction?”

Questionnaire

The main instrument was the questionnaire that had two major sections. The first part was divided into three sub-titles : teachers’ perceptions of teaching grammar, teachers’ perceptions of correcting students’ grammatical mistakes and their perceptions of the causes of students’ weakness in EFL grammar. This section consists of 24 items selected from the observation notes and the findings of literature. In addition, it was based on a 5-point Likert scale using the following keys:

- 5 = Strongly Agree 4=Agree
3 = Not sure 2= Disagree
1= Strongly disagree

In the second part, teachers were asked to rank the problems according to their prevalence.

Research procedures

The following procedures were taken in conducting the present study:

1. Review of related literature and observing some teachers from basic schools.
2. Conducting six different observations to six teachers teaching grammar.
3. Designing the questionnaire.
4. Administering the questionnaire and was corrected by Dr. Thwayba al-Barwani from Sultan Qaboos University.
5. Distributing 30 sets of questionnaire, collecting all and then eliminating 9 incomplete ones.
6. Analyzing the data to answer the research questions.

Data analysis

To answer the first research question (RQ.1), the researchers selected the method “observation” or qualitative method to answer “What should the balance of practice to presentation be in grammar instruction?”. Five of the six teachers started with warm-up activities (5-8 minutes), then they spent from 21 to 28 minutes explaining and presenting the new grammatical rules. The lesson lasted for 40 minutes. They left the students with some time to practice and produce newly introduced grammar pieces in different contexts. One teacher had a warm-up activity and then spent a few time explaining the new item and she gave her pupils a plenty of time (nearly 25 minutes) to practise what she had introduced. The students had sufficient time to produce the specific new form and to use it in various contexts. She reflected that learners need to practise what they are exposed to. The emphasis should be on the practice stage rather than the presentation stage as many teachers deliberately or do not follow the practice stage when they teach grammar.

To answer the research questions (RQ 2-RQ5), (SPSS) program is used to find the mean and the standard deviation of the sample. The statements of the questionnaire were classified

into 3 categories: (1). Teachers' perceptions of teaching grammar. (2). Teachers' perceptions of correcting the students' grammatical mistakes and (3) teachers' perceptions of causes of students weakness in grammar. The second section deals with EFL teachers' perceptions on the prevalent problems concerning teaching of grammar.

R Q 2 : What are teachers' perceptions of teaching grammar?

Table (1): shows the mean and the standard deviation for each statement. From the table we can infer that teachers are highly motivated to teach grammar and they consider grammar is an important aspect of language that needed to be taught explicitly. The highest means were in the first item and third statement that were "I am highly motivated to teach grammatical rules" and "I think grammar teaching has been as important as other aspects of FLT in recent years." They reached 4.285 and 4.250 respectively. Teachers also believe that using presentation practice produce (PPP) is better than using task-based learning (TBL). In addition, they think that teaching adults grammar is more significant than teaching it to young learners.

Table (1): Teachers' perceptions of teaching grammar

Teachers' perceptions of teaching grammar	Mean	Std
1. I am highly motivated to teach grammatical rules.	4.2857	.71714
2. I think grammar should not be taught at all.	1.3333	.91287
3. I think grammar teaching has been as important as other aspects of FLT in recent years.	4.2500	1.11803
4. I believe that teaching grammar to young learners is similar to teaching grammar to adults.	2.3333	.96609
5. I believe that grammar has no place in young learners' classrooms.	2.4762	1.07792
6. I think teaching grammar using an inductive approach is better than following a deductive one.	3.4762	1.12335
7. I must follow the curriculum guide when I teach grammar.	2.7619	.99523
8. I think PPP(present, practice and produce) model is better than TBL (task- based learning) with average learners.	3.5000	.94591
9. I spend more time on presenting and explaining the new grammatical rule(s) to my learners than practicing the new introduced rule(s) with them.	2.6667	1.01653
10. When I use PPP model, all of its stages should be equal in terms time allocating in each lesson.	2.9524	.97346
11. I believe that adopting any model depends on the learners' needs, age, level and aptitudes..	4.5714	.50709

RQ. 3: What are teachers' perceptions of correcting the learners' grammatical mistakes?

To answer the third question, a descriptive statistics approach was used. Table (2) shows that the teachers support the notion of correcting the students' grammatical mistakes.

They think that the weight of the marks in the assessment is sufficient. A majority of the teachers believe that correcting students' grammatical mistakes is a must in all cases.

Table (2): Teachers' perceptions about correcting the learners' grammatical mistakes

Teachers' perceptions of correcting grammatical students' mistakes	Mean	St D
12. I think correcting students grammatical mistakes is time consuming.	2.4762	1.43593
13.I believe the weight of grammar marks is enough in the new assessment tools.	3.2381	1.09109
14. I think that correcting students' mistakes is a must in all cases.	3.4211	1.21636
15. I believe that grammar study aids students to get high scores on the English exams.	3.4762	1.28915
16. I never correct my students' grammatical mistakes .	1.6190	.92066
17. I think that correcting grammar mistakes enables my students improve their English.	4.2381	.70034

RQ. 4 : What are the causes of students' weaknesses in grammar?

To answer this question, a descriptive statistics approach was used. As shown in table (3): the analysis of data of the study revealed some causes of students' weaknesses in grammar. The first reason for students' weaknesses in grammar was "the big number of students in each class does not help them have enough practice on grammar". This item had the highest mean of 4.57 and standard deviation of .7464. Then, teachers believe that "there are a few communicative, authentic tasks in the textbooks concerning grammar". This item got a mean of 3.95 and standard deviation of .97. After that came "learners do not practise what they have learnt at home" as the third factor of students' weakness in grammar as teachers have perceived.

Table (3): Problems that EFL teachers consider prevalent when teaching grammar

Teachers' perceptions of causes of students' weakness in EFL grammar	Mean	St d
18. The teachers' method of teaching that focuses on teaching grammar deductively.	2.8095	.98077
19. Learners do not practise what they have learnt at home.	3.8571	1.15264
20. Teachers do not provide learners with sufficient chances for practice the learnt grammatical items.	3.0000	1.33771
21. There are a few communicative, authentic tasks in the textbooks concerning grammar.	3.9524	.97346
22. The difficulty and the complexity of English grammar.	3.1000	1.16529
23. The tests, quizzes and other assessment tools do not encourage learners to revise grammar profoundly.	2.9048	1.44585
24. The big number of students in each class does not help them have enough practice on grammar.	4.5714	.74642

RQ. 5: What are the problems related to grammar instruction that EFL teachers think prevalent?

In order to answer this question, the researchers have stated five basic elements that are related to problems of grammar instruction: teachers, learners, assessment, textbooks and classroom environment; and then asked participants to rank them according to their prevalence.

Table 5: The prevalent problems of teaching grammar that are ascribable to the five elements

Problems related to	Teachers	assessment	Classroom environment	Textbooks	learners
Mean	2.3810	2.6190	3.0952	2.7143	4.1905
Std. Deviation	1.68749	.92066	1.37495	1.00712	1.32737

The table reveals that the problems that are related to the learners' motivation, aptitudes etc are the most prevalent in the Omani schools. This element had the highest mean of 4.19 and the standard deviation of 1.32737 according to the teachers' responses. The next element is the classroom environment in which the mean was 3.095 and std of 1.37495. This is followed by textbooks. The teachers considered textbooks as prevalent since the data analysis showed a mean of 2.7143 and the Std of 1.007. Assessment was found to be a less prevalent problem in teaching grammar and finally the problems that were associated with teachers' methods, language proficiency etc) were the least prevalent according to the teachers' responses when teaching grammar to the Omani students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following are some recommendations for EFL teachers, supervisors, curriculum designers and assessment officers and parents.

1. All teachers should offer their learners many opportunities to practice the new introduced grammatical features. They can do this by reducing the presentation phase time and increasing the time of practice and produce stage(s).

2. Grammar should be taught in a context. Therefore, the role of curriculum designers and teachers is to introduce the grammar form(s) in meaningful, communicative contexts.
3. Parents should be informed about the importance of letting their children practise what they have learnt in order to be fluent learners. Parents should continue what the teachers have started with their children.
4. The teacher should follow the efficient factor (efficacy, economy and ease) in preparation and presentation of grammar and consider the appropriacy factors that focuses on the level, age and needs of the learners.

This research provides information that will enhance further discussion and encourage additional research to aid in the development of innovative and practical ideas for how to teach and assess learners' grammar.

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Appendix: (A) The instrument used in the study

Dear Teachers,

The following questionnaire is designed to obtain your views about teaching grammar, correcting your students' grammatical mistakes, causes of students' weakness in English grammar and problems that are prevalent when teaching grammar lessons.

You are kindly requested to respond to this questionnaire by rating these items using the following scale. Please in your response, indicate your opinion by putting a (\surd) in the appropriate box.

5 = Strongly Agree

4 = Agree

3 = Not sure

2 = Disagree

1 = Strongly Disagree

Background information about the teacher:

Gender : () Male () Female

Years of experience in teaching: _____

Grades/ classes you are teaching now : _____

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