

Iranian EFL Students' Attitudes to the Techniques Used for Teaching English Grammar

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper was to examine the Iranian EFL students' attitudes to the techniques used for teaching English grammar. The present study is done in a language centre in Iran. For this reason, three classes in an English institute, in Mashhad, were selected. The subjects (Iranian female language learners) were selected by non-random sampling. They were chosen purposefully.

To identify the Iranian EFL students' attitudes to teaching English grammar, a series of observations was done. And after observation, some interviews with language learners were planned to make known their attitudes towards teaching grammar. The constant comparative method (CCM) was used to find out the subjects' underlying concepts and themes frequently mentioned. These general themes and underlying concepts were put in some categories. Then, these categories were organized in a coherent and meaningful manner. The results suggested that language learners believed that teaching grammar was boring and was not useful, hence they underestimated it.

Key words: Technique; English Grammar; Attitude; EFL; Teaching.

Introduction

Teaching a foreign language has different parts. One of the most significant parts is teaching grammar. However, the most important goal of teaching is learning. Learning grammar seems difficult but students can learn it easily on the contrary

their negative beliefs which learning grammar is a difficult job if not impossible. Nevertheless, the most difficult part appears after learning grammatical rules, namely, the most important challenge is related to applying the grammatical rules and making correct sentences (Khajavi, & Abbasian, 2011).

The word grammar is associated with “a fixed set of word forms and rules of usage”. This is a misconception that hearing the word grammar reminds many people, even language teachers. There are even divisions for grammar; good grammar and bad grammar. Good grammar refers to “prestige forms of the language” or the forms used in formal situations and in writing. But, what is bad grammar or simply, no grammar? It includes everyday conversations, daily dialogue or the form of language that nonprestige speakers use (Byrd, 1998). But where is the root of this misconception? Why do people, even language teachers, have a wrong idea about grammar?

This misconception stems from the fact that language learners cannot apply their knowledge of grammar even after spending many years in the grammar classes (Cawley, 1957; Hudson, 1987; Macauley, 1947).

Hudson (2001) adds another reason for this misconception. He believes there is no strong underpinning for teaching grammar. He points out that there is not any boost for grammar in university. Teachers teach something they learned as students at school not in university. There is not anything new about grammar that university can provide to students (Peng, 2011). What can we expect from a subject with such shaky basis?

Krashen (2007) stresses that instruction grammar, expressing difficult rules, analyzing structures about the target language is not language teaching, but “language appreciation”.

In his latest article, Krashen (2007) states both learners and teachers are aware of deceiving themselves. They suppose that study of grammar is responsible for students' progress, but

“in reality their progress is coming from the medium and not the message”. In brief, Krashen believes that “language is acquired through use and often time means more than principles that are learned in the traditional sense”.

Some researchers agree with Krashen's views on the teaching of grammar.

Elley, Barham, Lamb, and Wyllie (1975) conducted a study in New Zealand to find out the effectiveness of teaching grammar. They reported that English grammar instruction had “virtually no influence on the language growth of typical secondary students”.

After doing an experimental research about grammar instruction, Harris (1962) detected that on an assessment test for sentence complexity and surface errors, five high school classes who received grammar instruction for two years performed worse than a similar group which did not receive any grammar instruction.

According to Larsen-Freeman (2001), learners are responsible for learning. From the psychological viewpoint, learners' motivation is considered very important in learning (Vossughi, 2000). If students are motivated and eager to learn, learning will take place (Dadvand & Azimi, 2009). The motivation highly depends on the teaching techniques in the field of learning a foreign language (Mahmood, 2007). In addition, the students' attitude has a great influence on their learning (Fazio & Powell, 1989). Hence this study is also targeted at ascertaining the Iranian EFL learners' attitudes to the techniques used.

Review of Literature

Iranian English learners have problems in applying all language skills. (Pourshahian, et, al, 2012). They learn English in Iran, where the native language is Persian and English is a foreign language. Regarding this situation, Doman,

(2013) stated that the formal teaching is the only way they can learn English, at schools or language centers and most of language teachers, if not say all of them, are native speakers of Persian. Dolati & Mikaili (2011) pointed out there is no chance to learn English in a real context through natural interaction in the target language. Khansir, et, al (2014) stated that the most problematic area for Iranian learners is communication. They cannot communicate freely in the English language. This may be due to the methods of English language teaching and learning environment. As mentioned before, the environment is not suitable for applying another language (Alen, 2013, Arikan, 2011). The experiences of language teachers who have taught in different universities and some language centers for many years, showed that English language graduates in Iran encounter many problems in using English for communication, since the native language is Persian and English language is a foreign language (Ajayi, 2011). When they are in a real communication situation, they are often deficient in required words and some other language items they need to get their meaning across (Dahmardeh, 2010). Consequently, they are unable to keep the interaction going for an extended period. Monshi-Tousi (1980) has carried out research regarding English proficiency involving 55 Iranian students studying in United States. The results showed that the proficiency of the subjects was related to the time spent in the United States rather than studying English in Iran. The subjects complained about the weakness of their proficiency after graduating from schools or even university. This weakness can be referred to different factors such as lack of target language environment, motivation, teaching methodology and so forth. A number of the students who were accepted in university and passed the university entrance exams do not know the basics of English language. Some of them know absolutely nothing. How can the teachers teach these students? It is a big question. It is like waking the dead!

About one-third of the Associate degree courses and one-sixth of Bachelor degree courses are taught in Persian, in Iran. According to Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens (1984), the best way for improving English, is teaching other subjects in English. They conducted a study in Nigeria; all subjects are taught in English in high school. This has two important results: first, each student can experience and receive much greater amount of language comparing with outside and second the students are influenced by the class teacher more than other people. But, the most important point is that teachers' proficiency must be very excellent (Souto-Manning, 2012), otherwise, the students will suffer. Halliday et al. (1984) concluded that teaching other subjects in English is the best way of teaching a language, but all the teachers who teach the subjects must be perform with excellence. Therefore, it can be suggested here, if most of our university courses, not all of them will be taught in English in Iran, it definitely helps students to improve their abilities, and in turn, improve their communicative competence. It is obvious that to use the language more successfully, it must be used in real life situations (Guo,2013).Unfortunately, English is regarded just as an academic subject in schools (Yousefi, 2010), language centers and universities. Students lack enough practice and for this reason, acquisition will not occur. Even language teachers do not have enough practice in English (Zohrabi, et, al, 2012); they use Persian most of the time even after becoming English language teachers. They use English if there is no way as a medium of communication and this hardly ever happens (Pishghadam & Zabih, 2011).

Halliday et al. (1984) suggested that: "Oral mastery depends on practicing and repeating the patterns produced by a native speaker of the foreign language. It is the most economical way of thoroughly learning a language ...When one has such a control of the essentials of a language; he can almost automatically produce the usual patterns of that language. This

shows the importance of using the target language in language teaching” (p. 16).

Fatemi & Asghari (2012) stated that the most of teachers in Iran, especially in schools and universities, use Persian to teach words and English grammar. Although the Communicative Language Teaching approach stresses the importance of teaching words in context, the words are still taught in isolation (Ghorbani & Marzban, 2013). The majority of teachers do not use listening because they lack technical equipment. Therefore, the only skill which can be used in class is reading the dialogue or conversations for students and asking them to repeat. And this skill does not help students to improve their ability to apply their knowledge in real situations (Khansi & Pakdel, 2014).

Purpose of Study

The aim of the present study is as follows:

To examine the English learners' attitudes to the techniques used for teaching grammar.

Methodology

Subjects and procedures

According to the methodology of this study, qualitative method, some subjects were needed. For this reason three classes in a center with their language learners were selected as samples (subjects) for collecting qualitative data for answering the research questions. In brief, the subjects were selected by non-random sampling. The classes were selected purposefully and the learners were chosen non-randomly. The subjects were selected purposefully from an English Center, in Mashhad, Iran. The institute is a semi-governmental center which works under supervision of the Ministry of Education. The subjects

were not selected randomly, yet maximum effort was applied to select from various geographical, ages and social level.

This language center was selected because it could give the most useful information for in-depth study. Since grammar was not taught in most language centers in Iran, the major focus was on speaking and listening. The majority of language centers ignored grammar teaching. The selected language center was the only one that has grammar classes in Mashhad.

The subjects of the present study included 41 language learners. They were 41 intermediate level EFL students from same L1 background (Persian). The age of students ranged from 11 to 22 years and they have been studying English as a foreign language for at least 7 years in some institutes. The level of students was important, because after finishing the intermediate level, they could attend the grammar class and the language center identified their level. And they have also experienced different methods of teaching and learning a foreign language. All subjects participated in this study voluntarily; it means that they were free to decline to answer any questions or they could drop out from the study at any time they wanted. There was no reward for their participation, and no punishment for refusal to participate. The aim of the study was explained to the subjects and they were informed that they would benefit from the outcome of the research in general. This study was carried out in Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi, Iran, and all the subjects were Iranian and spoke Persian as a first language and English as a foreign language. Because the language of the subjects of the study is Persian, interviewing with subjects by other languages is not possible. Need for deep understanding of subjects' responses and of interview contents is an important obstacle to running the study elsewhere.

The observations were done in the class during one semester (one month and a half, three days a week, with every session taking two hours). Generally, there were 22 sessions. The 11th and 22nd sessions were devoted to mid-term and final

examination, respectively. Therefore, these two sessions were excluded from the series of observations. 20 sessions out of 20 were observed to describe the methods/techniques for teaching English grammar in Iran.

After finishing the series of observations, the learners were interviewed in order to examine their attitudes towards the techniques used for teaching grammar and to find out the factors that influenced the students' reactions. It was planned that interviews with learners lasted up to 45-60 minutes each (if necessary, the interview sessions could be extended to as many as needed.) The questions started with general questions about the teachers, and then they moved towards the selected techniques. The rest of the questions were made according to the teacher's activities in the class (using the observations). Kavaliauskienė (2003) states "interviews are known as reliable sources for gathering data on learner needs". Therefore, for better understanding of the learners' reactions to the techniques used for teaching grammar interview was also done. Generally speaking, interview data were added to the data obtained from observation because the researcher wanted to know the subjects' (learners) ideas, beliefs, opinions and expectations. Ekrami (2001) believes that whenever a researcher intends to gain a general trend, interview is the best and most appropriate instrument.

The other reason for conducting interviews with Iranian EFL learners relates to the fact that according to our culture, Iranians feel nervousness while writing (Ekrami, 2001). They prefer not to answer some questions, or write something which is not true. So, the researcher was used interview in order to get deep understanding; she could indirectly gain some insights during the conversation.

All the interviews were conducted by the same researcher. All interview sessions were recorded and were subsequently transcribed. The materials required for this study include: observation and interview.

Observation: To study actual behaviours, observation was done. Creswell (2005) defines observation as follows: “observation is the process of gathering open-ended, firsthand information by observing people and places at a research site” (p. 211). Observation will be done in order to describe the techniques used for teaching grammar. According to Creswell (2005), descriptive analysis is done to identify general trends. Therefore, to explain the general picture, observation was done about the techniques of grammar teaching.

According to Mirzaee and Fatemipour (2000), observations can be used in determining if a project is working as planned or not. In addition, observation can provide valuable data about teaching styles and the way of covering the materials.

Interview: Subjects were interviewed in Persian. The interviews were semi-structured because, in qualitative design, the interviews should be informal, free and without a special structure. It must be like a friendly chat (Mirzaee & Fatemipour, 2000). Interviews were done face to face, separately, and they were recorded.

Kvale (1983) defines the qualitative research interview as “an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena” (p. 174). For better understanding about the English learners' attitudes to the techniques used for teaching grammar and to find out the factors that influenced the students' reactions, depth-data is needed. Since, in face-to-face interview, there is no delay between questions and answers, interviewees answer spontaneously, it is supposed that their answers exactly reflect their opinions (Mirzaee & Fatemipour, 2000). Furthermore, interviewers can observe facial expressions.

Some researchers believe that interview is the most reliable instrument for gathering data, because specific

information can be obtained through interview which is not obtained through other instruments (Ekrami, 2001). The survey instruments for this study were developed by the researcher.

Analysis

The constant comparative method (CCM) was used to analyze the data obtained from observation and interviews. Glaser and Strauss (1967) believe the constant comparative method consists of four stages:

1. Comparing incidents applicable to each category,
2. Integrating categories and their properties,
3. Delimiting the theory, and
4. Writing the theory

These stages were followed in this study for analyzing the data. Goetz and LeCompte (1981) pointed out: "CCM combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all social incidents observed" (p. 58). The first step was categorizing the data, and then comparing them was done and refining the categories was the last stage. While the data were recorded and classified, the comparison across categories was done. Continuous refinement was done while data collecting and analyzing. Goetz and LeCompte (1981) suggested that: "As events are constantly compared with previous events, new topological dimensions, as well as new relationships, may be discovered" (p. 58). I carried out data analysis during and after the data collection by following the guidelines suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994, pp. 10-12) (See Figure 1.1). Miles and Huberman define data analysis "as consisting of three current flows of activity: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification" (p. 10).

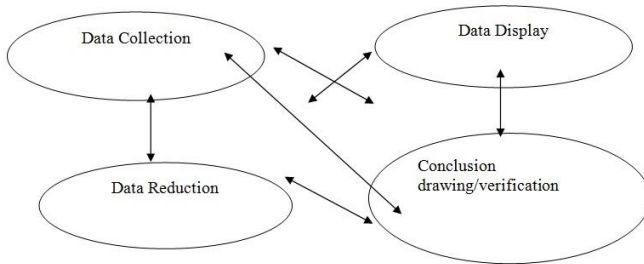


Figure 1.1: Components of Data Analysis. Adapted from “Qualitative Data Analysis (2nd ed.)” by M. B. Miles and A. M. Huberman, 1994, p. 12. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Interviews

I personally conducted all interviews; since the interviews were carried out in Persian, all the texts were also written in Persian. In the data analysis process, I used the original written texts in Persian. However, I translated some selected parts of the interviews into English in order to support the findings and discussions. All of the translated texts were returned to the participants for their review and verification. None of them made changes to the texts.

Since the data were in hard copy, the researcher selected to do in coding by hand rather than electronically. After numbering and coding, I categorized the themes which emerged from the data. I used three types of coding, namely open coding, axial coding and selective coding. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), the main purposes of open coding are “to conceptualize and categorize data” (p. 123). Axial coding which is the second stage of data analyzing is “the process of relating categories to their subcategories...linking a category at the level of properties and dimensions” (Ibid). Selective coding is the final stage of data analyzing which is “the process of selecting the central or core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filing in categories that need further refinement and development” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 116). And I also used the Constant

Comparative Method. The categories and final version were verified by the subjects of the study.

Observations

After conducting the observations, the fieldnotes were coded and synthesized. As with interview, clear links were established between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data, and then the data were examined for emerging themes that fitted the purpose of study. Finally, the categories emerging from the data analysis of the interviews and class observations were examined in relation to the research questions of the present study.

The next step was member checking; the final list of categories was returned to a few subjects. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) point out: "The member check, whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members are those stake holding groups from whom the data were originally collected, is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314).

But, it must be mentioned here, during interviews, to confirm accuracy, the researcher made a point to restate or summarize what was said before moving to the next question. This served also as a probe for the interviewees to further clarify what they had already said. The summary also allowed for a better transition to the next questions. In summarizing, I tried to connect and pull together and accentuate the contradictions, dissonance, and multiple voices; in short, validity enhancing procedures (suggested by Wolcott, 1990) and the essentials of good fieldwork were consciously adhered to. Then, the result was demonstrated in report form.

The constant comparative method (CCM) was chosen to analyze the data of the present study, because, according to Boyatzis (1998), this study is "data driven approach", that is, by using raw answers, some codes and themes would be made. According to Ekrami (2001), the constant comparative method

(CCM) is inductive, that is, the researcher does not impose the themes, and rather, they emerge from the data. Since the nature of this study is the same, choosing the constant comparative method (CCM) is appropriate.

Seidel (1998) demonstrated a model to explain the basic steps of qualitative data analysis. His model has three parts: noticing, collecting and thinking about important things. These parts are cyclical and interlinked. Noticing the important things causes the researcher to put them in a category; it means that data breaks down into small parts. Then, the data will be labelled by some codes, then organizing and collecting must be done.

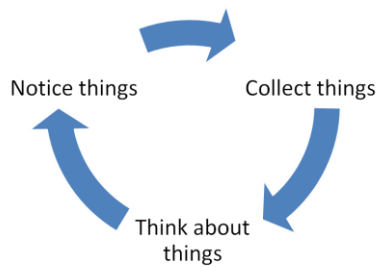


Fig 1.2 The Data Analysis Process (Seidel, 1998)

Seidel (1998) believes that codes acts in two different ways; as objective, they show the facts and bring the ability for furtherer investigation, that is, they help in collecting the data. On the other hand, the code labels reflect the process of thinking.

In brief, nine major themes emerged from analysis of the interview data and observation:

Table 1-1

	Theme	Frequency	Percentage
1	Hesitation	34	82.92
2	Inability	37	90.24
3	Uselessness	33	80.48
4	Useful	8	19.51
5	No Usage	8	19.51

6	Memorization	33	80.48
7	Boring	37	90.24
8	No similarity	13	31.70
9	Not Feeling Secure	39	95.12

The first theme was “hesitation”; 34 students out of 41 (82.92%) hesitated to answer the questions. It seemed that they were scared. They did not want to evaluate the quality of their classes and their teaching methods. After being assured that their statements would be kept like a top secret and taking away the tape recorder (in some occasions that the researcher used paper and pencil), they agreed to talk. But they asked me not to reveal any personal information about them such as their age, class and teachers’ name. To assure confidentiality, I just showed the general information.

The second theme derived from the group interview was “inability”; 37 students out of 41 (90.24%) stated that they were unable to understand their teachers’ lectures when the lecturers delivered in English. I asked them what they did in case of not understanding. They replied they used some books in their mother tongue, asking from their friends and they tried to translate the text of their books. The language learners confessed that they did not listen to their teachers most of the time in the class. They listened just while the teachers used Persian language or read from the books.

The language learners mentioned in some classes they had to answer the question (doing some exercise after teaching), they just focused on the same exercise; namely, they did not pay attention to what was going on in the class; instead, they tried to find the correct answer. I asked them what would happen if they could not answer correctly. They did not know the exact reason, but they preferred to find the correct answer.

According to Larsen-Freeman (2001), learners are responsible for learning. From the psychological viewpoint, learners’ motivation is considered very important in learning (Vossughi, 2000). If students are motivated and eager to learn,

learning will take place (Dadvand & Azimi, 2009). The motivation highly depends on the teaching methods/techniques in the field of learning a foreign language (Mahmood, 2007).

The third theme was uselessness; 33 out of 41 (80.48%) of language learners believed that learning grammar has not been useful yet, they couldn't write well and they were not able to speak grammatically. They believed that they used some structures they heard many times in speaking and writing. They were able just to use those structures who heard before rather the grammatical rules.

On the other hand, 8 of 41 students (19.51%) stated that learning grammar is useful (forth theme). Teaching and learning grammar helped them in all skills. It was true that they are not able to apply their knowledge (fifth theme: no usage), but at least, they knew formula (8 out of 41; 19.51%).

In his latest article (2007), Krashen states that both learners and teachers are aware of deceiving themselves. They suppose that study of grammar is responsible for students' progress, but "in reality their progress is coming from the medium and not the message". In brief, Krashen (2009) believes that "language is acquired through use and often time means more than principles that are learned in the traditional sense".

In this study 33 out of 41 language learners (80.48%) believed that they memorize the rules, if they memorized the rules and were able to remember them in the grammar test; it would mean they had learned (the sixth theme). But, they also had problem while taking a test; if there were a sign (grammatical sign like NOW for present continuance), for example, they would able to answer the question, otherwise, they wouldn't; however, they used their memorized rules in any cases. They could just find the right answers, but they didn't know why this item was correct not the other ones.

Larsen-Freeman (2001) used a special term for this problem; "inert knowledge problem". This term is used for teaching grammar; students learn grammar as a set of rules

but they cannot activate their knowledge out of the class or even to another part of lesson in the class, although they are able to apply those rules in the relevant exercises. She believes one reason of the inert knowledge problem is the method of teaching.

Some students (37 out of 41) described the grammar class was too boring (the seventh theme), (90.24%), they either studied the grammatical rules before (in other language classes or at schools) or the grammatical point is too new to understand. It seemed that there was not coherence among the material to be taught.

Brophy (2009) believes that there is another problem; the coherence of the material presented in the textbooks. He believes that content lacks coherence and some separated topics are covered rather than connected ideas. He states “these problems are often exacerbated by externally imposed assessment programs that emphasize recognition of isolated bits of knowledge or performance of isolated subskills” (p. 3). Brophy (2009) states research shows that connected knowledge can be learned deeply and is retained longer; furthermore, it is accessible for application.

But, the other problem in grammar class referred back to the fact that the learners (13 out of 41; 31.70%) couldn't find any connection between most of English grammatical points and their native language grammar (Persian). These data was considered as the eighth theme “no similarity”.

It is possible to find some aspects of English grammar that are comparable to students' native language. Teacher can ask students to locate these similarities; the students must think and point out how this specific grammatical point is expressed in their native language (Littlejohn & Hicks, 2009).

The last theme, the ninth theme revealed from the interview data was “not feeling secure”. 39 out of 41 language learners (95.12%) expressed that they didn't feel secure when they were not able to understand what was going on in the

class. They complained that whenever they mentioned this problem most of the teachers replied that someday they would be able to understand and apply their learned knowledge, but the students wanted a guarantee; in addition, they stated that they need to apply grammar now, for admission in university, for example, maybe in future they wouldn't need to use English grammar.

There is an important point here which must not be forgotten; meaning plays an important role in the learning field (Zhou, 2013). When learners hear or read something, they will forget if they do not know the meaning. Learning from communication activities is impossible without understanding (Thompson, 2010). This is true about grammar. Students cannot apply the grammatical rules; while they do not know the meaning and function of the components. According to Ur (1996), "grammar and meaning were interwoven; grammar does not only affect how units of language are combined in order to look right; it also affects their meaning" (p. 76). The majority of teachers agree with the view that it is too difficult to teach a language without knowledge of its structure and its functioning (Hedge, 2000).

Discussion and Findings

The findings of this study revealed that the learners' attitudes has great effect on their learning; if students believe that teaching grammar is a waste of time, they underestimate it. And it is reflected in their learning. The other issue which must be considered is that perhaps students believe teaching and learning grammar is vital, but their attitude towards the current techniques is negative.

In addition, some teachers believe that teaching grammar is a waste of time (Basturkmen,2012). But, they have to teach grammar to keep their jobs. They are asked to teach according to the policy of the language centre. They must

choose to teach grammar or quit. The teachers have to teach English grammar against their desire and these negative attitudes can affect the learners' attitudes subconsciously and indirectly. (Birjandi& Kazemi, 2010, Borg,2011). On the other hand, the students' attitudes are changed. According to Kelly (1995), when attitude and behaviour are different, it is because of social pressure. She adds that the best solution is changing the teachers' thinking about grammar. For doing this important job, first of all, the attitude of teachers must be understood. Regard to this matter, additional research is obviously needed

The other point that must not be forgotten here is the role of the learners in the education process. Broady and Dwyer (2008) pointed out that for obtaining the best result of teaching and learning, the learners must actively participate in the process of education. Unfortunately, I saw students as "receivers" that is, they received whatever was being taught by the teachers. Therefore, I tried to give them some general information about the different methods of teaching and then asked them to think about the method they would prefer.

Larsen-Freeman (1998) pointed out that there is a misunderstanding about grammar; many persons think learners acquire the grammatical points on their own; they assume teaching grammar is not a necessity. But, she believed that acquiring grammatical points can occur for immigrants, especially young immigrants. But, it does not happen to all the learners. She claims, "Among the same immigrant groups are learners who may achieve a degree of proficiency, but whose English is far from accurate."

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