
Learners' Beliefs of the Role of Grammar in EFL Learning

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Abstract:

The role of grammar knowledge in foreign language learning and teaching has been one of the most controversial issues in SLA research. This debate has led to investigation of various variables and factors that influence attitudes related to grammar. Many studies that have focused on the effects of grammar teaching on learners' acquisition of L2 knowledge have demonstrated positive results. Although classroom practices and teaching strategies are determined by teachers' perceptions of the role of grammar in foreign language learning, one essential factor that should not be underestimated is learners' beliefs. Despite not being as largely researched, learners' beliefs of the role of grammar knowledge and its teaching have been the focus of various recent studies.

The aim of this study was to explore Albanian EFL learners' beliefs of the role of grammar knowledge and grammar teaching in EFL learning and teaching. It also explores the learners' attitudes and preferences of grammar teaching strategies used by their teachers. 10th grade high school students (925) who participated in the study answered a 5 point Likert scale questionnaire. The findings demonstrated a very positive attitude towards grammar knowledge

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and its instruction, which suggests a need for consideration of learners' beliefs and needs before adopting various teaching strategies.

Key words: learners' beliefs, grammar knowledge, grammar instruction, EFL teaching, classroom practices

1. INTRODUCTION

The role grammar knowledge plays/should play in learning a foreign language has been addressed by scholars and researchers in the field all over the world. Based on personal experience or on conducted research, some of them have reached the conclusion that grammar should be given a central role and have placed it at the heart of L2 learning. Others have either attributed very little importance to its position or completely downplayed it as unnecessary or retardant. All these trends have influenced the various teaching methods and approaches that emerged on the way. Affected by researchers' methods and driven by their personal views and beliefs about grammar and its position teachers have adapted numerous approaches and some of them have even developed their own methods and techniques of teaching grammar (Sogutlu 2015).

Researchers have also explored teachers' views and opinions about the role of grammar. However, very few of them have shown enough interest in students' perceptions of the topic.

This research aims to investigate Albanian EFL learners' views of the role of grammar knowledge and its instruction in EFL learning, their attitudes towards grammar teaching, practicing strategies and corrective feedback. Although modest, this study attempts to make its contribution in a relatively young area and to serve as inspiration for larger-scaled research.

A short literature review of the role of grammar in EFL teaching and learning and of research in learners' beliefs will be

given in the literature review section, which will be followed by the research methodology, its findings and discussion and conclusion part.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Role of grammar knowledge and grammar instruction

Since grammar is defined to be the system of structures that make up a language, then grammar knowledge means being aware of these structures/rules. If a learner possesses grammar knowledge of a language does it mean that he has the ability to use the structures/rules correctly? For most learners acquisition of grammar knowledge takes place in the learning environment. But does exposure to formal grammar instruction in the classroom help the L2 learners establish the awareness and eventually the competency to properly implement those forms? Supporters of negative answers to this question have always held it that grammar instruction should be dismissed altogether. By distinguishing between conscious learning and unconscious acquisition of language Krashen (1984) was the one who started the hot debate over the role of formal grammar instruction holding that “we acquire (not learn) languages by understanding input that contains structures that are beyond our current level of competence”.

However, unconscious acquisition of language does not imply that the users always remain unaware of the structures they use and there is not little support of this hypothesis. Since exposure to the language and as a result unconscious acquisition is not always possible for various reasons, but even if it were, why should we not draw the learners' attention in order to make them, as Schmidt puts it, “notice” (Schmidt 1993) the different forms and use them consciously. Disagreeing with Krashen's approach of the way adults process input Terrell (1991) suggests that a conscious knowledge of grammar may

play a greater role in language acquisition and processing. No other definition of grammar instruction could be more comprehensive than Ellis's (2006). For him grammar instruction involves any instructional techniques that draw learners' attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it.

Another hotly debated issue is the effect grammar instruction has on fluency and accuracy. Terrell (1991) believes that although explicit grammar instruction might not immediately increase fluency, its contribution to long-term results is undisputable. His study revealed that students who received explicit grammar instruction were much more successful in a discrete-point grammar test than the ones who only received comprehensible input containing the target questions. According to Savignon, (1991) for communication to happen, willingness of participants does not suffice, their knowledge of structures or rules about language functions is necessary. Although a supporter of communicative approaches, Thompson (1996) argues that there exists a misconception about grammar teaching in CLT; communicative language teaching (CLT) does not mean not teaching grammar. He adds that the focus has moved from teachers *covering* grammar to learners *discovering* it through communicating in general or about grammar. Making use of various communication activities, which might be called indirect grammar instruction, in order to introduce specific grammatical structures, might be more effective and fun for learners than simply explaining grammar rules and patterns.

Foto's study (1994) with Japanese EFL learners also concluded that performance of grammar consciousness-raising tasks/activities benefits the learner significant proficiency gains, which were maintained even after a 2-week-period. Ellis (1995) suggested that one of the several methods of dealing

with grammar instruction in order to enhance learners' accuracy in L2 grammatical forms, are production-based/interpretation tasks.

Nassaji (2000) believes that "if accuracy is not achieved unless learners pay attention to form, learning may be more effective if learners focus on form while using language for communication." There seems to be a mutual interchangeable effect that communication activities and grammar structures have on each other. We could conclude that, on one hand, making use of communication to focus on specific grammar structures/forms contributes to accuracy and fluency. On the other hand, mastering complex grammatical structures through practice contributes to communicative competence.

In their study Batstone and Ellis (2009) argue that through grammar teaching learners should be supported to develop new connections between form and meaning and incorporate them into their current grammar knowledge. They underline that in order for the learners "to have the opportunity to experience target features in the kind of language use that they will experience outside the classroom" meaning-focused activities are required. In this respect teachers should apply activities that help the learners understand the different meanings that two slightly different forms convey, which when not clear enough to the learner might lead to misunderstanding. Sometimes a single comma can make a big difference as with defining and non defining relative clauses (Sogutlu 2014).

Although many researchers in favour of communicative language teaching have totally rejected grammar instruction there are others who have come up with ideas that do not neglect grammar knowledge and teaching. As a long-time practitioner, Azar (2007) points to the positive contribution teaching of grammar can play in second language instruction when grammar-based teaching is combined with communicative language teaching. According to her, teaching of

grammar means “teaching how English works through helping the students to understand grammar concepts”. She also observed that students with no previous grammar experience were less successful than those who had some. Familiarization with grammar forms and structures, even if not at very high levels, speeds up the learners’ L2 acquisition and adds to their attainment of new concepts.

According to Chung (2005), both structural and communicative elements have a role to play in EFL and ESL. He believes that only after having acquired some grammar knowledge will a learner be able to attain communicative competence. Actually, acquisition of communicative competence in the target language without previous knowledge of grammar is possible only in the target language-speaking country or environment. Since the classroom does not and cannot offer the same context, familiarizing learners with grammar knowledge of L2 seems to be an important tool that will speed up their acquisition of the target language.

All researchers and teachers would undoubtedly agree that every learner has a unique way of perceiving and acquiring new things. However the number of learning styles commonly agreed upon varies from four to eight. Felder and Henrique’s (1995) argue that students learn more when information is presented in a variety of modes and support their point with the results of a research conducted by Stice (as cited by Felder, 1995), who concluded that students retain 10 percent of what they read, 26 percent of what they hear, 30 percent of what they see, 50 percent of what they see and hear, 70 percent of what they say, and 90 percent of what they say as they do something. If we bear in mind these different learning types and what is retained by students according to how they are involved, it can easily be concluded that formal grammar instruction followed by tasks/activities appealing to all learning styles would benefit all the learners. It lies with EFL teachers

then to explore effective ways of engaging learners into compelling activities.

2.2 Learners' beliefs

Borg (2003) emphasizes the strong relationship between learners' beliefs and their habits by arguing that learners' attitudes to learning and their learning habits are strongly influenced and determined by their beliefs. This means that learners are more likely to focus on language aspects and skills they think are more important or necessary; meanwhile, negative attitude towards the significance of a particular language aspect might result in little or almost no attention to that aspect. Learners' beliefs influence their approaches to teaching and learning as well. Delija and Tabaku (2009) argue that learners who deem grammar difficult to learn are inclined to prefer grammar-based methodology. In order to widen research and to provide more insight in learners' beliefs many studies have recently focused on learners' perceptions of the role of grammar knowledge and its instruction in EFL learning and teaching. Below a short review of research and findings will be discussed.

One of the first to have conducted research in this area was Schultz (2001). Although his study was comparative – it compared learners and teachers' beliefs- it revealed learners' positive attitudes towards the role of grammar knowledge and the contribution of its instruction in EFL learning. Findings demonstrated that students not only liked studying grammar but they also considered it essential to language learning. Despite its different purpose, another study with a focus on grammar instruction is that of Burgess and Ettherington (2002), who did not explore learners' beliefs directly but through investigation of teachers' perceptions of learners' difficulties with grammar studying and acquisition. They concluded that students' backgrounds, preferences, wishes and needs had a large impact on their preferences for learning

grammar. The same questionnaire was used by Kacani and Mangelli (2013) with Albanian EFL teachers and they found that teachers thought their students preferred deductive grammar teaching arguing that learners felt insecure in cases of no explicit knowledge. In their study Savignon and Wang (2003) concluded that Taiwanese EFL learners who participated in their research consider the integration of grammar instruction necessary for initial practise but feel that at later stages grammar instruction should be done only when needed.

Recent research has focused on learners' preferences of grammar teaching methodologies. In 2009 Spada et al developed a questionnaire on learners' preferences of integrated or isolated form-focused instruction, which has later been implemented by many researchers in different countries such as Elgün-Gündüz et al (2012), Songhori (2012), Ansarin et al (2014) and Ebrahimi (2015). Some of the findings have revealed a preference on the part of the students towards an integration of grammar instruction in communicative activities (Elgün-Gündüz, 2012; Songhori, 2012); in some of them learners didn't show a clear preference for any of the two types (Ebrahimi 2015); in one, advanced learners seemed to have a preference for integrated FFI and beginner learners did not show a preference for isolated FFI or integrated FFI (Ansarin et al, 2014).

3 THE STUDY

3.1 Description of the study

Prior to the present study, the authors conducted a smaller scale research with students of two private high schools in Albania L2 learning (2015), which also focused on learners' perceptions of the role of grammar knowledge in EFL learning. Considering the fact that the medium of instruction of content subjects in the participant schools is English, the authors

thought to apply the study in public schools aiming to draw more representative conclusions for the majority of Albanian EFL learners, who study in public schools. The categories in both studies may focus on the same categories but the questions are different. The questionnaire implemented in this study aimed to measure learners' perceptions and beliefs of three main elements related to grammar teaching: the role of grammar knowledge in language learning, the role of grammar instruction in the classroom and preferences for specific grammar teaching strategies. The research questions this study attempted to answer have been formulated as follows:

What are Albanian EFL learners' beliefs of the role of grammar knowledge and grammar study in EFL learning? Do they consider explicit grammar instruction important? Do they have any preferences for particular grammar teaching strategies and classroom practices? What are their views of error correction and corrective feedback?

3.2 Participants and data collection

The questionnaire was applied to all 10th grade students of four public high schools in Tirana, Albania. The total number of participants was 1036, but only 925 questionnaires were returned completed and valid to be considered in the analyses. Out of the 335 participants 527 (57%) were girls and 398 (43%) were boys. All the participants' mother tongue was Albanian and most of them had been learning English as a foreign language since the 3rd grade of primary school. It was explicitly expressed in the questionnaire that the collected data would be used for scientific research only and would have no impact on the participants themselves or their teachers. Instructions were given to participants' EFL teachers who then administered the questionnaire in their English classes.

3.3 The questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this study was prepared by the authors inspired by the studies of Schultz (2001) and Burgess and Etherington (2002). It was arranged and implemented in Albanian in order to reduce students' anxiety and to ensure their better understanding. Participants were asked to respond to each item using a 5-point Likert scale with 1 indicating *strongly disagree* and 5 indicating *strongly agree*. Before implementation the questionnaire was discussed with 3 experienced high school teachers and 3 university teachers, who checked phrasing and appropriate language use. Their suggestions for revision of some items and reduction of their total number were taken into consideration thus resulting in a final version with 18 items. Finally the questionnaire was piloted with 35 university students majoring in English Language and Literature at a private university.

3.4 Analyses

The aim of the present study was to explore Albanian EFL learners' beliefs about the role of grammar knowledge and its instruction in EFL learning and their preferences for particular grammar teaching strategies and classroom practices. The collected data were coded into the SPSS to be statistically analyzed.

Table 1 gives descriptive statistics of the data about the first research question: what are Albanian EFL learners' beliefs of the role of grammar knowledge and its study in EFL learning? The mean score, standard deviation and standard error of the mean were calculated for each of the four questions in this category. The mean score of the first statement (*Grammar knowledge is essential to mastery of the language*), which is the main of the group was 4.22, which reveals a very positive attitude towards grammar knowledge and its study. This is also supported by the standard deviation (0.879) and the standard error of the mean (0.028), which are just fractionally

different from the mean. The second statement (*I will be able to learn English after I have learned its grammar*) had a mean score of 3.24, with a fractionally different standard deviation (1.097) and standard error of the mean (0.036). The mean score of the statement about the importance of practicing grammar was 4.12, the standard deviation was 0.912 and the standard error of the mean was 0.039. The last statement of the first category (*the role of grammar in communication*), had a mean score of 3.27, with a standard deviation of 1.203 and a standard error of the mean of 0.039. All the results of the first category show a positive attitude towards grammar knowledge and its position in learning and mastering a foreign language.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics Beliefs about the role of grammar knowledge and its study

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>	<i>Std. error mean</i>
<i>Mastery of Language</i>	4.2293	0.87934	0.02899
<i>Language acquisition</i>	3.2484	1.09788	0.03616
<i>Grammar practice</i>	4.1264	0.91238	0.03011
<i>Grammar and communication</i>	3.2767	1.20329	0.03971

The second table shows the results of learners' views about the importance of grammar instruction in the classroom. The mean score (4.35) is relatively high, and the standard deviation (0.819) and the standard error of the mean (0.027) show that variability and dispersion from the average are statistically insignificant.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics Beliefs about importance of grammar instruction

	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean
<i>Explicit grammar instruction</i>	4.3595	0.81919	0.02704

In Table 3 results of the mostly preferred types of grammar instruction have been summarized. Deductive instruction has

the highest mean score (4.38), while inductive instruction the lowest (3.64). There is an almost insignificant difference between mean scores of integrated (4.084) and isolated grammar instruction (3.905). This could be justified with the provision of explicit instruction in both isolated and integrated instruction.

Table 3 Preferences about types of grammar instruction

<i>Scale</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>	<i>Std. error mean</i>
<i>Deductive instruction</i>	4.3804	0.90750	0.02992
<i>Inductive instruction</i>	3.6496	1.09570	0.03620
<i>Integrated FFI</i>	4.0846	0.99478	0.03276
<i>Isolated FFI</i>	3.9053	1.01125	0.03336

Table 4 summarizes learners' preferences of various activities used for practicing grammar. The mean scores of the four types of practices appear to be insignificantly different (-0.17), with the highest being 4.078 and the lowest 3.905. Although insignificantly different there seems to be a tendency for preference of written practice of grammar topics.

Table 4 Beliefs and preferences about classroom practices

<i>Scale</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>	<i>Std. error mean</i>
<i>Controlled practice</i>	3.9053	1.01125	0.03336
<i>Communicative activities</i>	3.9914	0.92461	0.03040
<i>Written work</i>	4.0217	0.95010	0.03132
<i>Homework</i>	4.0784	0.95730	0.03160

Tables 5 and 6 show respectively learners' views of grammatical error correction in different types of activities and their preferences for time of correction. In Table 5, mean scores revolving around 4.1 demonstrate a positive attitude towards all types of error correction and feedback. Table 6 shows results of preferences related to the time when error correction should be provided. Paired sample *t* test revealed that learners prefer feedback to be given as soon as the mistake is made ($m=4.03$,

s=1.09) to feedback given at the end of the activity (m=3.79, s=1.20), $t(922) = 4.717, p < .001$.

Table 5 Learners' Beliefs of Error correction

<i>Grammar correction in</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>	<i>Std. error mean</i>
<i>Written work</i>	4.2161	1.00000	0.03295
<i>Controlled practice</i>	4.1078	1.00072	0.03303
<i>Communicative activities</i>	4.0639	0.93866	0.03088

Table 6 Preferences for time of Corrective Feedback

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>	<i>Std. error mean</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig</i>
<i>At the moment</i>	4.0325	1.09377	0.03600	4.717	922	.001
<i>At the end of the activity</i>	3.7946	1.20379	0.03958			

4 DISCUSSION

The controversial issue of grammar study and grammar instruction in EFL learning is an area of SLA research that has only recently started to be addressed from the learners' perspective. This study was motivated by the nonexistence, to the authors' knowledge, of a similar study in the country (Albania) where it was conducted and by the expectancy of the authors for a positive attitude towards various types of explicit grammar instruction and classroom practices. The aim of this study was to explore important learner variables such as their beliefs and preferences for particular types of instruction and classroom practices.

As results revealed, the participants share a very positive attitude towards grammar knowledge and grammar instruction in the EFL classroom. A vast majority agree that grammar is essential to mastery of the language and think they will have learned the language after having learned its grammar. This is also reflected in the third question of the first category; more than half of the learners (82%, n=758) think

that studying and practicing grammar helps them to advance with the language. However, only nearly half of the respondents consider grammar knowledge an important factor for communication. This might be explained by the fact that foreign language teaching tradition in Albania continues to be “traditional”. In other words, grammar is considered an important part of language learning and all grammar topics are usually explicitly explained deductively or inductively. Learners’ perceptions may thus be largely influenced by the kind of instruction they are accustomed to. Learners’ learning experiences and expectations influence their instruction preferences as well. This might account for consideration of explicit grammar instruction as important by almost 90 percent of the participants. To some extent, these findings and conclusions are consistent with those of Schultz (2001), who in his study concluded that Colombian learners’ strong beliefs regarding the efficacy of grammar study and grammar instruction could be attributed to the way of teaching they are used to.

The importance given to explicit instruction is perfectly reflected in the second category of questions. Of the four teaching strategies included in the questionnaire deductive instruction appears to be the most preferred, which can also be attributed to familiarity with traditional grammar instruction, followed by integrated and then isolated instruction. Although inductive instruction may also be explicit it is not as much preferred as the other types. It may be concluded here that Albanian EFL learners are inclined towards any kind of instruction that includes explicit grammar explanation.

Practicing grammar items was considered to contribute to language learning; this can also be concluded from the results of the category about classroom practices related to grammar study. Learners share a positive attitude towards all types of activities that include practicing grammar topics; both writing and speaking classroom activities are perceived to help

students learn better. Although doing homework may sound boring to students a sizeable majority think homework helps them practice and learn grammar patterns.

Error correction was another element aimed to be inspected and the data show that students believe that corrective feedback has a positive role in their EFL learning. A vast majority think they learn from corrective feedback of written work and of grammar exercises. Surprisingly, correction of grammar errors in communicative activities is also considered useful. In this category, the time mostly preferred for error correction and corrective feedback was measured as well. Although both types are considered to benefit learners, there is a stronger preference for feedback provided at the moment the error is made than after the activity has been completed.

5 CONCLUSION

The long debate about the role of grammar knowledge and grammar instruction has encouraged and motivated SLA researchers to extend research in other related subfields, the youngest being learners' perceptions. With a history of no longer than 20 years, this subfield of SLA has not been the focus of many studies, especially in the Albanian context, which served as the authors' primary motivation for the actual research.

This research attempted to present a picture of Albanian EFL learners' perceptions of the role of grammar knowledge and its instruction in EFL learning. The data provide evidence of a strong positive belief that formal grammar study and grammar-related practices play a positive role in EFL learning. A sizeable majority of students agree that study of grammar is significant to mastery of EFL. Students share preferences for grammar study and grammar practice which accounts for the importance they think grammar knowledge has in EFL

learning. Explicit grammar instruction is considered an important part of learning and this can be attributed to the learners' familiarity with traditional language teaching. This attention is also mirrored in the learners' inclination towards any grammar teaching strategies that provide explicit instruction; though, they are more favourably inclined towards deductive instruction. Learners also have strong preferences for activities that include grammar items, especially controlled practice. The data demonstrated that learners share positive views about the role of corrective feedback in learning grammar and that they prefer being given feedback the moment mistakes are made.

Despite its limitations, such as the number of participants and the location, this study has some suggestive implications for EFL teachers and researchers. EFL teachers might find it useful to find out their learners' beliefs and preferences towards grammar instruction in order to examine compatibility with their own perceptions and to implement desirable and useful teaching strategies. More studies with a higher number of learners from different backgrounds can be conducted in order to be able to generalize. Other studies can separately focus on each of the categories researched in this study so that more detailed data are obtained and more practical suggestions made.

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