

Asian Students' Perceptions of Grammar Teaching in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract

The use of grammar teaching in the field of second language acquisition has been well studied, but there exists a gap in the literature as regards students' perceptions on this important topic. This study was conducted on a group of 16 students from seven Asian countries who were enrolled in a credit ESL course at a Canadian university. The students were interviewed in groups of four by one of four researchers and the data were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The findings revealed that although from similar cultural and educational backgrounds, the Asian students' perceptions of form-focused instruction varied widely. Their different perspectives were based on their previous language learning experiences, their language proficiency, current academic needs, and future career choices. The information gathered is of significant value to ESL teachers who intend to meet students' needs as well as reduce conflicts caused by different perspectives between teachers and students regarding whether or not grammar teaching should be encouraged in the classroom.

Keywords: Asian students, perceptions, grammar teaching, ESL, Canada.

Introduction

The role of grammar instruction and error correction has been the subject of significant controversy in the field of language teaching and learning (Ellis 2006; Nassaji & Fotos, 2004). Researchers and educators have either defended or challenged the use of focus on form. Much research has been conducted on the place of explicit focus on form in language teaching and learning, and addresses what researchers and educators believe are the best methods to accommodate students' needs. However, the literature rarely touches upon students' beliefs regarding grammar teaching in language learning. This paper will first provide background information on our research and give a brief summary of the role that grammar instruction has played in modern teaching approaches. It will then report a study conducted in Canada on Asian ESL students' perceptions of grammar teaching, and finally highlight the pedagogical implications of this study.

Point of Entry

Smith (1990) describes a starting point for research that results from "problems of knowing – of being told one thing, but in fact knowing otherwise on the basis of personal experience" (p. 632). Our point of entry into this research is situated in our own language learning, language teaching, and teacher training experiences.

The research team comprised two native English speakers, a native Chinese speaker, and a native Arabic speaker. Our language learning experiences took place in different contexts but were linked by a number of similarities. The native English speakers in our group had studied French as a second language as part of their mandatory elementary and high school education. The non-native English speakers had studied English as a foreign language (EFL) in their home countries. We were all taught, initially, through grammar based instruction and had little opportunity for communication in the target language.

In addition to learning a second or foreign language in our native countries, each of the researchers had language learning experiences in countries where the target language was the first language. In

this situation, we each needed the language to communicate with native speakers and to conduct our everyday business. In these contexts, we used the language to communicate rather than to pass tests, and we learned not only through instruction but also through out-of-class experience.

As language teachers, we have continually sought to find the best methods to teach English in both EFL and ESL (English as a second language) situations. Some of us have taught English using a form focused approach, and found that students continued to repeat errors and were unable to communicate effectively. Others of us have taught with a focus on communicative competence and have been confronted with students who demand explicit grammar instruction. Thus, a large part of our search for the best methods has centered on determining the place of grammar instruction in the language classroom.

As student teachers, we were exposed to the various theories of language acquisition and consequently the theories regarding the place of explicit grammar instruction in the classroom. Depending on which approach was current during our teaching training, we were taught either that grammar instruction was a necessary part of language education or that it was ineffective, which in turn influenced how we taught.

Our own perceptions on the place of grammar instruction have been formed by our experiences as students and teachers, as well as by our individual goals for language learning and our exposure to theory. Our current perceptions and philosophies of our respective educational institutions determine whether we emphasize, de-emphasize, or ignore grammar instruction in our classrooms. Often, we have encountered conflicting opinions from students whose perceptions differ from our own. For this reason, we were interested in exploring students' perceptions about grammar instruction. We were also interested in learning about the types of experiences that had formed those perceptions.

Literature Review

Until the 70s, there was much emphasis on focus on form and error correction. Evidence of this is seen in such teaching methods as the Grammar Translation Method and the Audio-Lingual Method. Such methods were based in behavioral psychology and emphasized the formulation of correct language habits. Regarding error correction, Jagemann (1886) wrote that "no faulty answer [be] ever allowed to pass" (p. 220). Brooks (1960), a proponent of audio-lingualism, said, "Like sin, error is to be avoided and its influence overcome, but its presence is to be expected, ... the principal way of overcoming [error] is to shorten the time lapse between the incorrect response and the presentation once more of the correct model" (p. 56).

However, during the early 70s, language acquisition research started to raise doubts about the suitability of such behaviorist methods. Researchers like Krashen (1985), Terrell (1977), and Hammond (1988) argued against focus on form, and suggested that error correction may actually do more harm than good. Hammond argued that error correction had no value in speeding up the acquisition of the L2. Others suggest that it can actually raise what Krashen calls students' "affective filter," meaning that students' anxiety levels increase and therefore make it more difficult for them to study the language.

The more recent communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches which minimize the importance of form focused instruction and explicit error correction are believed by some researchers to be inadequate (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell, 1997; Mitchell, 2000). In fact, research in linguistics indicates that some type of focus on grammatical forms is necessary if learners want to develop high levels of accuracy in the target language. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that grammatical awareness and error correction for certain grammatical structures may actually enhance L2 acquisition (Doughty, 1991; Fotos, 1996).

While there is abundant literature on focus on form and error correction in foreign language classrooms (Ellis, 2002; Schulz, 1996, 2001) and on teachers' perspectives (Farrell, 1999; Farrell & Particia, 2005; Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001), little research has been carried out regarding students' beliefs on their use in the ESL classroom. Studies that do look at learners' beliefs typically focus on language learning in general and not on the role of grammar instruction in particular, although it has been the topic of many debates in the field.

Several studies carried out in foreign language situations do seem to indicate that students find error correction and grammar instruction helpful in language learning. In fact, Schulz's (1996) study on stu-

dents' and teachers' views on error correction and the role of grammar instruction in a foreign language setting revealed that many students have a more favorable attitude towards grammar instruction than their teachers. The students also believed that in order to master a language, it was necessary to study grammar. On the other hand, more teachers than students believed that it was better to practice language in simulated real life situations than to study grammatical forms explicitly. Peacock (1998) pointed out various gaps between teachers' and learners' beliefs on foreign language learning, which were also observed in Schulz's study. He found that learners were much more in favor of error correction and grammar exercises than their instructors, while instructors rated pair and group work much more highly than the learners. Peacock concluded that there is a high probability that this has a negative effect not only on the learners' progress but also on their satisfaction with the class and their confidence in their teachers.

Horowitz (1990) asserts that there is often a mismatch in perception between students and teachers on the use of grammar and that this may often result in negative effects. The goal of her study was to determine students' beliefs on language learning so that teachers could bear them in mind while teaching. Kern (1995) believes that an awareness of this mismatch is important in understanding conflicts that could result in lack of motivation or anxiety.

However, it is important to not only be aware of students' beliefs about the role of grammar in language learning, but also to understand how these ideas about language learning were formed. It may be that students' prior language learning experiences shaped their beliefs. Alternatively, their teachers' beliefs about language may contribute to their choice of teaching methods, which in turn may contribute to the shaping of the beliefs of their students.

The Study

This section discusses the research methods used in terms of participants, instrument, data collection and analysis.

Participants

The participants in the study were 16 immigrant ESL students, including nine females and seven males who came to Canada from China, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, India, and Sri Lanka. The participants had been living in Canada for various lengths of time, ranging from six months to five years. At the time of the interviews, all of the participants were enrolled in a credit ESL course at a Canadian university. The credit ESL courses are designed to be taken in conjunction with or in preparation for regular courses in the learners' field of study. Thus, most of the learners interviewed were preparing to take either the TOEFL test or the CAEL (Canadian Academic English Language) test to enable them to study in engineering or science programs at North American universities. Some were already taking courses in these fields at two universities. All of the participants had studied English in their native countries prior to coming to Canada, and all had relatively high proficiency in English.

Instrument

The instrument (see Appendix) used in the study was based on literature regarding grammar teaching. Two research questions were addressed: (1) What are the language learning experiences of the ESL students? and (2) What are the ESL students' perceptions regarding explicit grammar teaching? The interview questions were composed of two parts. Part one (Questions 1-5) requested demographic information from the students: country of origin, first language, duration of language learning, confidence in language skills, and reasons for studying English. Part two (Questions 6-9) asked whether the students believed that grammar was important in language learning, whether teachers should teach grammar explicitly, which skills grammar instruction was helpful for, and whether teachers should correct students' mistakes in writing and/or speaking.

Data collection and analysis

Each of the researchers interviewed a group of four students. As the interviews were conducted in group settings, the topics which emerged were guided by the interviewer but developed as a result of the group interaction. Each of us recorded our conversations and transcribed them verbatim, and distributed them to the other members of our research group.



In interviewing these 16 learners, we hoped to gauge their perceptions of explicit grammar teaching in language education. We also hoped to discover the origins of these perceptions. Our intention, however, was to gather this information without letting the participants know specifically what our research questions were. There were several reasons for this. First, we did not want to seem to be merely offering a choice between two extremes, namely, that grammar teaching was either desirable or undesirable. Second, since we each had our own views on the topic and our own hypotheses with regard to the study, we did not wish to influence the participants' answers in any way. Third, we hoped that by engaging the participants in conversation rather than confronting them with pointed questions that they would take an interest in discussing their language learning experiences. Essentially, we attempted to avoid an interview situation in which participants' responses might be shaped by their perceptions of what we wanted to hear.

Our interview process and our analysis were guided by the concept of "active interviewing," as described by Holstein and Gubrium (1997). Conceptualizing an interview as active involves recognizing it as an interactional process in which narratives are constructed collaboratively by all participants. In construing the interviews as "active," we were searching not for objective truths but for responses that revealed learners' perspectives on grammar instruction. We recognized that these perspectives are dynamic and that the responses we obtained in our interviews would not necessarily be replicated in interviews conducted at a subsequent time or by another interviewer. It was our goal, however, to encourage a dialogue about students' perceptions of grammar instruction.

Results and Discussion

Through face-to-face interviews with ESL learners, we found that students' perceptions of explicit grammar instruction are quite different depending on their educational backgrounds, individual learning experiences, and their personal needs and goals. Here are some of the issues students raised during our interviews.

The importance of grammar in learning a language

During our interviews, some participants strongly stated that grammar instruction was very important for a person to learn a new language. They formed their views based on their past learning experiences in countries where English is taught as a foreign language and where more emphasis is put on explicit grammar teaching. In addition, instructors in these EFL contexts traditionally teach with a focus on improving students' reading skills. The interviewees' perspectives seemed to resonate with linguists' assertions in the research literature that explicit grammar teaching is beneficial to learners despite the current movement toward a communicative approach to English language teaching (Richards et al., 2001).

Several of the students interviewed considered grammar essential in learning English. For example, Students *M* and *N* both held this belief. In their opinions: "If you don't know the grammar clearly, you can't organize your sentences. So you may speak in a wrong way" (Student *M*). "If your grammar is not correct, the sentence is not clear, people cannot understand you" (Student *N*). Student *P* also believed this, saying, "If your grammar is wrong, you can't write correctly." Student *O* also held these views, but added that occasional grammar mistakes should be accepted: "I think grammar is important, but I don't think I need my grammar to be perfect. I think making a little grammar mistake is OK." Moreover, some students felt that there should be more focus on grammar in class. Their feeling is that although they learned quite a lot of grammar before, they were still not very comfortable with it.

Though some students attached great importance to learning grammar, others did not share this view. Even though they came from similar language training backgrounds (favoring explicit focus on grammar), students *A*, *J*, *K*, and *L* felt that grammar should not be emphasized in ESL language instruction. They suggested two reasons for this opinion. The first is illustrated in student *K*'s comment:

Grammar is important. But before in China, we learned a lot of grammar already. So we used to this grammar. It is important but we had learned grammar. So now we want to learn more. Grammar is there. My grammar is strong. Stronger than writing, reading, listening, or may be...mm...I want to learn another skill. We need speaking.

Student *K*'s remarks indicated a confidence in her grammar skills, which had been obtained in an EFL context. She felt that further focus on grammar was unnecessary, or at least secondary to other skills.

This attitude was observed by Zeng (2004), who found that Chinese students with a high level of language development expressed a desire to focus on oral skills rather than on explicit grammar study.

The second reason suggested for deemphasizing explicit grammar instruction can be derived from further remarks by Student *K*: "In Canada you need speaking, when I work with people. In China no chance to communicate with people. I think we should learn other skills than grammar." This comment, echoed by students *J* and *L*, demonstrates both the need and opportunity to improve communicative competence in the ESL environment as compared with the EFL environment, where grammar is both the primary focus and the primary assessment criteria. In the ESL situation, and specifically, the academic ESL or EAP (English for Academic Purpose) context, the required skills mirror those of native speaking university students.

The place of grammar instruction in the classroom

Students had differing perceptions regarding whether, when, and how often grammar should be taught in the ESL classroom. Responses ranged from viewing explicit grammar instruction as unnecessary and ineffective, to a preference for explicit and frequent focus on grammar instruction in the classroom. This variety of opinions reflects previous studies (Ikpi, 2001; Imai, 2007) which found that the value learners placed on grammar instruction depended on their current language proficiency along with their previous learning experiences and other cultural variables.

Students who expressed the belief that explicit grammar instruction was unnecessary or inadequate seemed to do so based on their perceived language requirements at the time. It seemed that students who had studied English in their home countries believed that further grammar instruction was not going to help them in using or learning the language in the ESL context. Student *J* believed that learning only the grammatical rules was not enough, and that learners had to practice the language and apply these rules in their speech and communication with others in order to attain fluency. Student *G*, an engineering student, shared the opinion that grammar instruction was not useful at his stage of learning. He questioned the need for grammar instruction and claimed that spending more time on grammar was not useful with regard to his intended profession:

I think it is not useful... Why you are studying grammar? Why you need grammar? Why an engineer need grammar? If you are an English professional then you need grammar... maybe high school or primary school students must know grammar... but in our stage I think... that spending more time with grammar is not effective.

Student *B* agreed with those others who thought that students did not need additional grammar because most students had already learned grammar from their previous teachers and from books. Her concern was how to use these grammatical rules when speaking to other people. She thought that grammatical rules could be picked up through listening or talking to other people. She did not want to learn English in the same manner as she had when she was younger. She assumed that students with higher language proficiencies could learn grammar in an implicit way and that there was no need to be taught in an explicit way in which they learned when they were beginners.

These students have a relatively high proficiency with the language, have studied grammar explicitly in the past and now have different needs with regard to how they use English. At this stage, their opinion is that explicit grammar instruction is inadequate in meeting their current needs and they favor a more communicative approach, which they believe is more beneficial to their educational success and social life.

Several students disagreed with the previous students' opinions that grammar should not be taught in class. In their view, grammar instruction was beneficial even though they had had previous explicit grammar instruction. Student *E*, for example, believed that grammar was important, especially for writing. Grammar for him was a way of improving his writing. He suggested that if they received a grammar lesson once every other week, it would help students to remember the grammatical rules:

If they give us advanced grammar every one other week ... one hour of grammar this is good for our essay... just how to use this sentence, what is the meaning of this sentence ... when do we use the present perfect or present perfect continuous ... if you give us information like remember [remind] us every other week this is good you know ... maybe we have refreshed our memory... to write a good essay.

Student *K* agreed with student *E* that grammar should be taught in class, but not excessively. She also wanted to be taught grammar in order to help her when writing essays. Like student *E*, she thought

that better grammar would lead to better writing. She wanted to “learn how to choose vocabulary, how to use the right word.”

These opinions supported Zeng’s (2004) finding that learners valued grammatical instruction as a tool for communicating in an acceptable way, and especially for writing. For these students, writing essays was an important element in their educational success and they saw a positive connection between grammar instruction and effective writing. They viewed grammar instruction as a valuable part of an integrated approach to language teaching.

Furthermore, there are students who believe that learning grammar is important for all students, both for those who had previously learned a lot of grammar and for those who have little knowledge of grammar. Student *H* thought that grammar teaching was beneficial for all English learners, and did not agree with student *G* who said that learning grammar was not useful or helpful for students. She believed that learning grammar would assist students who were just beginning to learn English, and that students who already have knowledge of proper grammar would benefit from reviewing previous grammar instruction. In her opinion, teaching grammar had positive effects on students with either low or high language proficiency. She said:

I know a lot of people, they don't speak, they don't learn English... If someone asks [if] they want grammar, that means they don't know grammar. The professor has to talk with students and ask their opinion and if most people want grammar... grammar is really helpful for people. If I studied grammar and then I learned again, that is good for me.

For which language skills are grammar instruction helpful?

Students had various perceptions of to what degree grammar was helpful in their learning and about which skills they thought grammar instruction was beneficial. Some students believed that grammar was useful in writing. They thought that for writing, learners must apply different grammatical rules, and that a good grasp of these rules made it easier for them to identify their mistakes.

Student *I* thought that grammar helped him the most in writing. He believed that his previous experience in learning the grammatical rules in his country was very useful to him. According to him, when people write they use longer sentences and concentrate more on the meaning, whereas when speaking, people use less complex language. Consequently, he believed that grammar became more important when writing. Students *K* and *O* agreed with student *I* that grammar instruction was useful when writing. Their perception was that when they wrote they could use their grammar skills and that when they made mistakes they could correct them more easily.

Students *M*, *N*, and *J* believed that in reading, grammar was very helpful. Student *M* claimed that if learners were not proficient in grammar they would face difficulties in reading and understanding, especially if they were confronted by long and complex sentences. Also, student *N* thought that knowledge of grammar facilitated the comprehension of academic articles, because “in academic articles, you often see a lot of long sentences. If your grammar is not good you can’t understand them.” Similarly, student *J* asserted strongly that grammar was very helpful for her in reading. She thought that when students read they faced some grammatical rules that they did not use in speaking or writing, and that therefore when they read, they should be aware of what these rules were and what meanings they carried.

It [grammar] for sure helps me in reading. When students read, there [are] lot of difficult grammar. We don't hear, we don't speak and in writing we write simple. I don't write a lot of grammar, difficult grammar. When you read you see sentences... grammar in them I don't understand. It is difficult to know what that sentence means. When I read and know the meaning of this word, this [is] verb, the present [tense]... these things. It is easy and grammar I think [is] important here.

Student *Q* felt that grammar was helpful in speaking. She believed that grammar could help her to choose the right words while she was speaking. She did not want to make mistakes when she talked to people. Accordingly, in her opinion grammar helped her to speak in a clearer manner. She said, “I think for speaking, grammar is very important. For me it’s very important because sometimes when I am speaking, I think I am using the wrong word. Because I don’t want to talk to somebody but use the wrong word.”

It seems that this group of Asian students believed that grammar was facilitating their language communication in writing, reading, and speaking. Their perceptions supported the study by Ikpia (2001) that students valued explicit grammar instruction because it enabled them to speak and write English properly.

Correcting grammatical mistakes

The majority of the participants stated that teachers should correct their students' grammatical mistakes. With regard to the students' opinions of where this correction should take place, their responses reflected Schultz's (2001) findings that students almost universally value error correction, particularly in writing.

Student *J* thought that teachers should correct students' grammatical mistakes in writing and sometimes in speaking. She believed that when her teacher corrected her mistakes in writing she was able to recognize them more easily. She believed that when writing she could understand more easily why she had made these mistakes because she had the time to go over them again, while when speaking she was not able to remember all the corrections the teacher may have made. Accordingly, she found that having had her written grammatical mistakes corrected benefitted her more than having had her spoken ones corrected. Likewise, student *K* thought that teachers should correct more mistakes in writing than in speaking, saying that if teachers did not correct students' mistakes, learners would think that they did not have any and would therefore keep repeating the same mistakes. Student *K* felt that if the teacher corrected her mistakes in speaking or writing it would help her to improve her English language learning.

It is better to correct our mistakes. I like in both speaking and writing. Writing more. Because when we talk or write and no one corrects [us], we think our English has no mistakes. We will keep doing the same mistake again and again because I don't know it is right or wrong. This way I cannot learn English well. When the teacher corrects I know I make mistakes then I try to correct it, not to do it again then my English become better.

Student *Q* said that the teacher should correct students' mistakes in writing but not in speaking. She agreed with student *J* that having grammatical mistakes in writing corrected enables the learners to look at their mistakes and think about them. Student *Q* also believed that when the teacher corrected students' mistakes in speaking this would make them confused and cause them to lose their focus. She felt that students should be given the opportunity to finish expressing their thoughts verbally without any interruption.

Students *H* and *L* thought that teachers should correct everything in students' writing. They said that the teacher should correct vocabulary, grammar, and the organization of ideas. Student *L* said:

I like teacher to correct everything in my essay, grammar, ideas, organization. To say we should put this idea here, use this verb or that verb, put it in present or past perfect. This way we can know why here is present, why this paragraph should be all in past and next paragraph for example all future. This way we know everything, the idea, the verb in past or future... you see... the whole thing on the paper. I think this kind of correction is important.

Pedagogical Implications

There are several pedagogical implications from this study that teachers may wish to consider. Since students and teachers may come from very different educational backgrounds, it is necessary to try to understand where the similarities and differences lie, as there will often be differences between teachers' and students' perceptions regarding language learning, and understanding these differences may thereby reduce conflict. Teachers and students who have contrasting ideas about the role of grammar instruction may experience conflict in the classroom, which may affect learners' motivation (Schultz, 2001). Students who are not motivated may become disillusioned with the language learning process. We do not suggest that teachers allow students to dictate their instructional methods; however, being aware of students' needs may encourage teachers to diversify their teaching somewhat in order to better address the learning styles of their students.

In order to come to an understanding, students and their teachers can participate in an ongoing dialogue, which would serve several purposes. First of all, it would allow the teachers to become aware of students' changing needs, and ideas of language learning. Second, it would help students to become more aware of each other's perceptions along with those of their teacher, and would also help them to be open to the realization that methods of language teaching and learning other than ones to which they have already been exposed are also useful. They may not change their minds regarding their own preferences, but they would at least become aware of alternatives. Being aware of different learning methods/strategies can enhance the learning process.

During these discussions, teachers can explain current theories of language teaching and learning. It would be advantageous for them to share this knowledge with the class because students can then understand the reasoning behind the teacher's methods. By discussing the nature of language learning with students, teachers can also become more aware of how they might influence their students' language learning. Moreover, it is important for teachers to keep in mind that not everything works in every context because of the nature and complexity of language learning. It is necessary for the teacher to take many things into account, such as students' backgrounds, motivations, reasons for studying the language, and so on.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was not to discover whether or not it is necessary to teach grammar explicitly. Rather, we wished to find out what students' perceptions were of focus on form and error correction and where these perceptions came from. From this study, it seems that even students from similar backgrounds may have very different preferences regarding grammar teaching, but that students do feel that there is a role for grammar instruction in language education. The students in our study, all having learned English in a foreign language setting, seem to agree that being in an ESL context and being surrounded by English daily is the best way for them to improve their language proficiency. They agreed that in their pasts, grammar instruction had been helpful, but now that they were in an English environment, grammar instruction should be limited. There is no doubt that individuals do differ in the amount of explicit grammar instruction they wish to have and that their perceptions of the importance of grammar instruction will change with time and circumstances.

It is important for teachers to be aware of their students' beliefs regarding the role of grammar instruction. This does not mean that teachers should necessarily teach grammar if their students demand it, but rather that teachers can become more aware of the kinds of learning techniques that students are accustomed to and prefer, and how these ideas mesh with their own. In order to become aware of each other's beliefs about the roles of grammar instruction and error correction, it might be beneficial for students and teachers to begin dialogues such as those that took place during this study. This could be useful in different ways: such dialogues would make students aware of learning methods and strategies that other students have found effective, and also, open and ongoing dialogues can be effective in minimizing the number of conflicts between teachers and students in the classroom.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. What country are you from?
2. What is your first language?
3. Have you studied any other language and for how long?
4. How confident do you feel with your English in reading, listening, speaking, and writing?
5. Why are you studying English?
6. Is grammar important in learning a language? Why or why not?
7. Should teachers teach grammar?
8. For which language skills are grammar instruction helpful?
9. Should teachers correct students' mistakes in writing and speaking? Why or why not?