Research Article

EFL Learners' Perceptions of Grammar Knowledge and Grammar Instruction in Foreign Language Learning



Linguistics

Keywords: EFL learning, learners' perceptions, grammar knowledge, grammar instruction.

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Abstract

The position that grammar should hold in L2 learning has been an issue of controversy among scholars and researchers resulting in teaching approaches and methods in which its role has been either overestimated or completely downplayed. Various studies have explored EFL teachers' beliefs about the role of grammar in L2 learning and their classroom practices. However, very little research has been conducted on the learners' perceptions regarding grammar knowledge and its instruction in the classroom. This study investigates Albanian EFL learners' perceptions about the role of grammar knowledge in the language learning process and the learners' acquisition of the target language. It also explores the learners' attitudes towards grammar instruction in the classroom and how it affects their proficiency in the target language. 335 male and female high school students who participated in the study were asked to answer questions about the topic. The findings suggest that further research which considers learners' beliefs will contribute to EFL grammar teaching methods. It might also encourage EFL teachers to reflect upon their beliefs about grammar instruction and employ grammar teaching approaches and classroom practices that do not overlook the learners' perceptions of grammar and its position in L2 learning.

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 thus placing 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.

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 some Albanian EFL learners' views of grammar knowledge and its instruction in EFL learning, their attitudes towards classroom practices regarding grammar as well as their beliefs about corrective feedback.

Before analyzing the research data a short literature review on the role of grammar in EFL teaching and learning will be introduced.

1.1 Literature review

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 exposal 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. In 1995 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 (Söğütlü, 2014).

Although many researchers in favor 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 longtime 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 Henriques (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. The Research

2.1 Description of the study

The purpose of this study was to discover Albanian EFL learners' perceptions of the role of grammar knowledge in EFL learning. This was achieved through 28 questions, which although not grouped, aimed to measure three main elements. The first consists of questions about students' perceptions of the role of grammar knowledge and instruction in EFL learning in general. The second element intended to be inspected was the students' opinion of their individual practices and their teacher's classroom practices regarding grammar instruction and grammar-based activities and how these practices have influenced/influence their progress with learning and even mastering the language. The third objective was to check students' opinion about grammar error correction of either students' own work or their classmates' and its influence on their language learning.

2.2 Participants and Data Collection

The questionnaire was applied to all students of 10th, 11th and 12th classes in two private high schools in Tirana. Out of the 335 participants 184 (54.9%) were girls and 151 (45.1%) were boys. The questions were written in Albanian and had the 5-point scales in the Likert format.

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.

2.3 Analyses

2.3.1 Students' perceptions of the role of grammar knowledge and instruction in EFL learning

A very strong majority of students 93.1% (Table 1) out of 335 participants agree/strongly agree that grammar knowledge is essential to learning a foreign language, while 83.5% (Table 2) agree that learning or studying grammar is an element that helps to master the language. Students' favorable opinion of grammar role in EFL learning is also supported by the fact that only 35.2% (Table 5) agree and 55.1% disagree that knowing grammar only serves succeeding in various tests. Surprisingly, while 24.2% (Table 2) of the participants don't agree that learning a foreign language means learning its grammar, 23.6% (Table 4) don't think that a learner who knows grammar knows the language.

TABLE 1
Grammar knowledge is essential to learning a foreign language

				0 0	0 0
					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	disagree	11	3.3	3.3	3.3
	undecided	12	3.6	3.6	6.9
	agree	123	36.7	36.7	43.6
	totally agree	189	56.4	56.4	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 2
Learning a foreign language means learning its grammar

					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	totally disagree	9	2.7	2.7	2.7
	disagree	72	21.5	21.5	24.2
	undecided	48	14.3	14.3	38.5
	agree	157	46.9	46.9	85.4
	totally agree	49	14.6	14.6	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 3
Learning/studying grammar is an element that helps to master the language

					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	totally disagree	3	.9	.9	.9
	disagree	44	13.1	13.1	14.0
	undecided	41	12.2	12.2	26.3
	agree	156	46.6	46.6	72.8
	totally agree	90	26.9	26.9	99.7
	missing	1	.3	.3	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 4
A learner who knows grammar knows the language

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	totally disagree	9	2.7	2.7	2.7
	disagree	70	20.9	20.9	23.6
	undecided	69	20.6	20.6	44.2
	agree	120	35.8	35.8	80.0
	totally agree	64	19.1	19.1	99.1
	missing	3	.9	.9	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 5
Knowing grammar only serves doing well in various exams

					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	totally disagree	55	16.4	16.4	16.4
	disagree	129	38.5	38.5	54.9
	undecided	32	9.6	9.6	64.5
	agree	69	20.6	20.6	85.1
	totally agree	49	14.6	14.6	99.7
	missing	1	.3	.3	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

Concerning the influence of familiarity with grammar structures on understanding a context or situation, while 83.6% (Table 6) agree that unfamiliarity can lead to not understanding or even misunderstanding only 54.1% (Table 7) agree to have experienced such situations.

TABLE 6

Being unfamiliar with a grammar structure may lead to not understanding or even misunderstanding a context (reading, listening, speaking)

					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	totally disagree	6	1.8	1.8	1.8
	disagree	16	4.8	4.8	6.6
	undecided	31	9.3	9.3	15.8
	agree	148	44.2	44.2	60.0
	totally agree	132	39.4	39.4	99.4
	missing	2	.6	.6	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 7

It has happened to me to not understand or even misunderstand a context because I was unfamiliar with a grammar structure

					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	totally disagree	27	8.1	8.1	8.1
	disagree	64	19.1	19.1	27.2
	undecided	61	18.2	18.2	45.4
	agree	135	40.3	40.3	85.7
	totally agree	46	13.7	13.7	99.4
	missing	2	.6	.6	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

2.3.2 Students' opinion of their individual and classroom practices

Out of the 335 participants 232(69.3%) (Table 8) like grammar instruction and 300 (89.9%) (Table 9) of them agree that studying and practicing grammar helps them advance faster with the language. 218 participants agree/strongly that they like grammar instruction and that studying and practicing grammar helps them progress with the language. 80.9% and 85.6% respectively agree/strongly agree that they use grammar patterns correctly in spoken and written language. 82.9% of the students think that they are able to identify and name grammar patterns in a text.

TABLE 8
I like grammar as a lesson or part of a lesson

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	totally disagree	6	1.8	1.8	1.8
	disagree	38	11.3	11.3	13.1
	undecided	59	17.6	17.6	30.7
	agree	145	43.3	43.3	74.0
	totally agree	87	26.0	26.0	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 9
Studying and practicing grammar help me advance faster with the foreign language

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	totally disagree	2	.6	.6	.6
	disagree	4	1.2	1.2	1.8
	undecided	26	7.8	7.8	9.6
	agree	157	46.9	46.9	56.4
totally agree	totally agree	143	42.7	42.7	99.1
	missing	3	.9	.9	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 10
I generally use grammar structures correctly when I speak

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		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	totally disagree	1	.3	.3	.3
	disagree	15	4.5	4.5	4.8
	undecided	46	13.7	13.7	18.5
	agree	195	58.2	58.2	76.7
	strongly agree	76	22.7	22.7	99.4
	missing	2	.6	.6	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 11
I generally use grammar patterns correctly when I write

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	disagree	11	3.3	3.3	3.3
	undecided	34	10.1	10.1	13.4
	agree	182	54.3	54.3	67.8
	strongly agree	105	31.3	31.3	99.1
	missing	3	.9	.9	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

 $TABLE\ 12$ I can easily identify or name grammar structures in a reading part

					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	totally disagree	2	.6	.6	.6
	disagree	17	5.1	5.1	5.7
	undecided	38	11.3	11.3	17.0
	agree	173	51.6	51.6	68.7
	totally agree	105	31.3	31.3	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

A vast majority (95.6 %) (Table 13) think that various exercises and activities done in class to practice grammar patterns help the students learn them better. When seen more specifically only 3.3 % think that written activities about grammar never or rarely help them learn grammar patterns (Table 14). While only 1.9 % think

that practicing grammar patterns in speaking activities rarely helps students learn these patterns, the rest agree that these activities sometimes (9.3%), often (39.7%) or always (48.7%) help them do so. (Table 15)

TABLE 13
Exercises and activities done in class to practice certain grammar structures help me to learn them better

					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	disagree	2	.6	.6	.6
	undecided	12	3.6	3.6	4.2
	agree	138	41.2	41.2	45.4
	totally agree	183	54.6	54.6	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 14
Writing activities done in class help me learn the grammar patterns

					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	never	1	.3	.3	.3
	rarely	10	3.0	3.0	3.3
	sometimes	42	12.5	12.5	15.8
	often	152	45.4	45.4	61.2
	always	130	38.8	38.8	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

 $TABLE\ 15$ Practicing grammar patterns in speaking activities helps me learn them better

					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	rarely	6	1.8	1.8	1.8
	sometimes	31	9.3	9.3	11.0
	often	133	39.7	39.7	50.7
	always	163	48.7	48.7	99.4
	missing	2	.6	.6	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

254 participants (75.8 %) agree that it is more important to practice grammar patterns in situations simulating real life than to analyze and practice these grammar patterns (Table 16).

TABLE 16

It is generally more important to practice a foreign language in situations simulating real life (interview, role play) than to analyze and practice grammar patterns

					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	totally disagree	1	.3	.3	.3
	disagree	17	5.1	5.1	5.4
	undecided	62	18.5	18.5	23.9
	agree	113	33.7	33.7	57.6
	totally agree	141	42.1	42.1	99.7
	missing	1	.3	.3	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

2.3.3 Students' Perceptions about Homework

Asking students to do homework is an inseparable part of teaching in Albania and very rarely teachers do not give written assignments. While 298 participants (89%) agree or strongly agree that homework helps them learn grammar patterns only 14 (4.2 %) disagree or totally disagree with this (Table 18).

TABLE 17
The teacher gives us homework to practice various grammar patterns

					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	never	6	1.8	1.8	1.8
	rarely	13	3.9	3.9	5.7
	sometimes	61	18.2	18.2	23.9
	often	132	39.4	39.4	63.3
	always	123	36.7	36.7	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 18
Homework about grammar patterns helps me learn them better

					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	totally disagree	4	1.2	1.2	1.2
	disagree	10	3.0	3.0	4.2
	undecided	23	6.9	6.9	11.0
	agree	164	49.0	49.0	60.0
	totally agree	134	40.0	40.0	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

2.3.4 Students' perceptions about error correction

312 of the participants (93.1%) think that teachers should correct students' written work, only3 of them (0.9%) disagree while 18 (5.4%) are undecided about this (Table 19). Teachers tend to think that students do not like to be corrected but figures in Table 20 show us that 93.4% of the participants agree that they learn when the teacher corrects their mistakes. 89.9% think they also learn when the teacher corrects errors made by fellow students in class (Table 21). All of the only three students who do not think teachers should correct students' written work agree that they learn when the teacher corrects their mistakes. Out of 8 students who disagree/totally disagree that they learn when their errors are corrected, only one is undecided while 7 others agree/totally agree that teachers should correct students' written work. (Table 22)

TABLE 19
Teachers should correct students' written work

					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	disagree	3	.9	.9	.9
	undecided	18	5.4	5.4	6.3
	agree	112	33.4	33.4	39.7
	totally agree	200	59.7	59.7	99.4
	missing	2	.6	.6	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 20
I think I learn when the teacher corrects the errors I make

					Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Percent
Valid	totally disagree	1	.3	.3	.3
	disagree	7	2.1	2.1	2.4
	undecided	13	3.9	3.9	6.3
	agree	135	40.3	40.3	46.6
	strongly agree	179	53.4	53.4	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 21
I think I learn when the teacher correct errors made by my fellow students in class

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	totally disagree	1	.3	.3	.3
	disagree	4	1.2	1.2	1.5
	undecided	28	8.4	8.4	9.9
	agree	155	46.3	46.3	56.1
	strongly agree	146	43.6	43.6	99.7
	missing	1	.3	.3	100.0
	Total	335	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 22

Teachers should correct students' written work * I think I learn when the teacher corrects the errors I make

Cross tabulation

		I think I learn when the teacher corrects the errors I make					Total
		totally disagree	disagree	undecided	agree	strongly agree	
Teachers should correct students' written work	disagree	0	0	0	1	2	3
	undecided	0	1	4	10	3	18
	agree	0	2	6	72	32	112
	totally agree	1	4	3	50	142	200
	missing	0	0	0	2	0	2
Total		1	7	13	135	179	335

TABLE 23

Teachers should correct students' written work * I think I learn when the teacher correct errors made by my fellow students in class Cross tabulation

		I think I learn when the teacher correct errors made by my fellow students in class					Total	
		totally						Total
		disagree	disagree	undecided	agree	agree	missing	
Teachers should correct students' written work	disagree	0	0	1	2	0	0	3
	undecided	0	0	6	11	1	0	18
	agree	0	1	15	65	30	1	112
	totally agree	1	3	6	75	115	0	200
	missing	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
Total		1	4	28	155	146	1	335

The five students who disagree that they learn when the teacher corrects mistakes made by their fellow students agree that teachers should correct students' work. Of the three students who disagree that teachers should correct students' written work, agree that they learn when teachers correct mistakes made by their fellow students while only one is undecided about this.

3. Discussion

Generally speaking the data collected from the research demonstrate that students share a very positive attitude towards grammar knowledge and grammar instruction in the EFL classroom. A vast majority think that knowing grammar is essential to the mastery of the foreign language and it does not only serve to succeed in various tests. Although for many students unfamiliarity with grammar patterns may lead to not understanding or even misunderstanding certain situations, a large number do not think that knowing grammar means knowing the language.

Unlike most teachers think, most students agree they like the study of grammar and practicing it because they think it helps them in their progress with the language. Both writing and speaking classroom activities are perceived to help students learn better. An insignificant number of students think grammar based activities done in class never or rarely help them learn various grammar patterns or structures. Activities simulating real life situations are thought to be more important and helpful to learning than practicing and analyzing grammar patterns.

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 of their own work or of their fellow students has a positive role in their EFL learning. Surprisingly, a very limited number of students think teachers should not correct students' written work.

4. Conclusion

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 results show that students share preferences for grammar study and practice which accounts for the importance they think grammar knowledge has in EFL learning. Therefore they may help some teachers reflect upon their beliefs of grammar instruction in EFL learning and consider their own students' perceptions before implementing various teaching approaches and classroom practices.

The findings might also arouse researchers' interest in further and wider research in the topic so that results are more general and serve as a reference to teachers and teacher trainers when addressing grammar teaching techniques in their seminars.

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