

Diploma Students' Perceptions about Their English Grammar Learnability at Umm Al-Qura University

Ahmed Saadawi. Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature, Unit of Programs, Applied College, Umm Al-Qura University, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine diploma students' perceptions about their experiences learning English grammar as a general requirement course at a higher education institution- namely Umm A-Qura University (UQU) in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, during the first semester 2022-2023. Random sampling was used to obtain the subjects of the study, who were students from different diploma programs attending English language classes at the starter level. The textbook taught was Business Result Starter, which uses the deductive method of teaching grammar through introducing the rules with examples in each unit followed by a section for free practice at the end. Many studies were conducted on the perceptions about teaching grammar, focusing on the perceptions of instructors, with an obvious lack for studies to analyze students' perceptions about learning grammar. The current study was carried out with qualitative methods to investigate the perceptions of the students and collect the information from their personal experiences regarding how they learned grammar in their English course during the first semester of 2022-2023. A number of ten students were selected as respondents for the study. Structured interviews were conducted whether face-to-face or on Webex. Data Collection techniques included individual discussion for more profound responses that helped in revealing their positive and negative perceptions about how they learned grammar. The study found that most diploma students held positive attitudes towards their experience learning grammar using the deductive method but it was not enough to achieve comprehensive learning or learning for all participants due to individual differences and learning styles. The main strengths of using the deductive method with the diploma students were straightforwardness, comprehensibility, meeting instructor's expectations, building up learner's self-confidence, self-learning, enjoyableness, time-effectiveness and building grammatical skill. For the negative perceptions from their experience in learning grammar that semester, the participants informed that they were contributed by obstructing fluency, difficulty to achieve a dual task on rules and free practice of EFL at the same time, attracting attention to rules rather than use of language, and the challenges some learners faced to learn the rules. Through these findings of this study, EFL lecturers at UQU would be able to know the challenges and learning techniques experienced by the students while dealing with grammar lessons, and eventually come out with student-oriented solutions for more effective grammar teaching and for opening new windows of grammar learnability for the students to join the diploma programs. In addition, this study is expected to enlighten both instructors and

students about the potential strengths and weaknesses of the deductive method of teaching grammar on the one hand, and to consider students' experiences and perceptions that might lead to new insights into adopting an integrated or blended method to better teach, and/or increase learnability of English grammar on the other.

Keywords: EFL, grammar, learnability, language acquisition, deductive method, perceptions

1. Introduction

Despite the debates emerging from the fact that children do not have to study grammar to learn their mother tongue, grammar plays an important role in learning English as a foreign language, as it analyses the language for non-native learners and facilitates their understanding of the logic behind its structures. Good use of English grammar can certainly enable a learner to communicate, express his/her ideas efficiently and make sure they are not misconceived. A good level of grammar mastery can also guarantee that listening and reading skills are instrumental. However, grammar is not only the rules of structuring a sentence; it has a lot to do with meaning, function, spoken English and written English. It is connected to syntax, semantics, morphology and pragmatics.

Grammar has always been in the picture of different EFL methodology including Grammar-Translation, the Direct Method, Audiolingualism, the Natural Approach, and the Communicative Approach or Communicative Language Teaching. To make a long story short, there are two main approaches to EFL grammar teaching and learning: deductive and inductive. A deductive approach is a rule-driven teaching-learning way associated with Grammar-Translation, which starts with the presentation of a rule and is followed by examples in which the rule is applied (Thornbury, 2002). In contrast, an inductive approach is the discovery learning one associated with the other methods, the Natural Approach in particular, and starts with some examples from which a rule is inferred (29). A deductive approach simplifies the rule for learners before learning new language, confirms many students' expectations about classroom learning, particularly for those learners who have an analytical learning style (30). It enables teachers to deal with language points as they come up, rather than having to anticipate them and prepare for them in advance (30). However, it might be off-putting for some students, especially younger ones who may not have sufficient metalanguage...used to talk about language such as grammar terminology or may not be able to understand the concepts involved, encourages a teacher-fronted, transmission-style classroom...at the expense of student involvement and interaction, and encourages the belief that learning a language is simply a case of knowing the rules (30).

The textbook used at the UQU diploma programs introduced grammar content at the beginner level, including such topics as pronouns, present simple and past simple. There

were two sections to cover the grammar lesson in every unit at the levels of presentation, drill and practice. These two sections are Language at Work to present the rules with examples and short exercises within each unit, and Practice File at the end of the textbook with two pages of exercises on the content of every unit including grammar, vocabulary and language functions. Therefore, the textbook used the deductive method to introduce the rules with examples and then provide exercises for verification of following them. Because of individual differences among the diploma students as learners of English as a foreign language, the extracurricular activities each student used, and the fact that students belonged to different types of learners, it was expected that the academic performance and learnability of grammar content through the textbook differed from a student to another although they all used the deductive method as a start point. While English grammar acquisition is affected by how both teachers and students perceive it as part of EFL acquisition, it was important to listen to the voices of learners and utilize the outcome of their experiences.

2. Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to investigate students' opinions about the way grammar was introduced in their English textbook in several diploma programs at UQU in the first semester of 2022-2023. It also aimed to analyze their reflections on the benefits and drawbacks of the method used, and map how they better used the new CEFR A2 English curriculum entitled *Business Result Starter* as a start point to learn grammar in integrated, combined, comprehensive student-oriented ways with additional learning resources and activities that might not stick to the method grammar was introduced in the textbook.

3. Literature Review

The list of reviewed literature covers a variety of related topics, namely the definition and importance of grammar in learning EFL, the development of grammar teaching methodology, comparisons between the inductive and deductive methods, the perceptions of EFL teachers on teaching grammar, teaching grammar in different contexts, and rarely the perceptions of learners at school or university levels in other contexts. It was obvious that there was a lack in investigating the perceptions of the learners and their grammar learning experiences, particularly in the Saudi context.

To start with, while Harmer (2015) defined grammar as a knowledge of what words can go where and what form these words should take, Burns (2009) considered it as a nourishing resource which helps students reinforce their language learning because the unit of the analysis was the sentence and the students' roles were to be able to recognize and classify the words in a sentence into the part of speech. Furthermore, Nassaji and Fotos (2004) contended that learners pass through developmental sequences and this suggests that it needs a teaching process to facilitate and scaffold these sequences. According to Ellis (2006), grammar teaching involves any instructional technique that draws learners' attention

to some specific grammatical form in such a way that helps them either to understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it.

Other studies have been conducted to analyze and/or compare the inductive and deductive approaches of teaching grammar. For example, Mallia (2014) asserted that a deductive approach with explanations was successful and related to learners' expectations when the examples were drawn from a familiar local cultural context, because teachers could therefore bring grammar deductively to the notice of the learners through rules but the socially-relevant examples promoted grammar consciousness rising inductively. Do (2013) analyzed the importance of teaching grammar in EFL classrooms at Vietnamese high schools and concluded that deductive grammar is suitable for adult learners but not for young students. In addition, A study from Morocco about the perceptions of English grammar learners at the university level stated that 65% of EFL teachers used the deductive method and relied on exercises to teach English grammar which caused students' boredom (Outaleb, 2015).

However, the majority of previous studies about English grammar focused on how to teach it and the perceptions of teachers, not on how to learn it or what increases its learnability. One of these several studies was Podmenik's (2015) to investigate the topic in Slovene secondary school EFL classrooms. The findings indicated that a substantial percentage of teachers prefer to follow the communicative approaches, and that many Slovene secondary school English teachers believe that grammar teaching requires an additional integration of context and communications skills into the grammar teaching models. However, Ellis (2002) contended that for most teachers of English, the priority of teaching grammar is to assist learners to internalize the structures/rules of language, taught in such a way that they can be used for communication both written and spoken, and therefore practice is directed at the acquisition of implicit knowledge of a grammatical structure.

The review of studies showed that while there was great consciousness of the importance and methodology of grammar teaching, there was a deficiency in analyzing the perceptions of the learners and what increases grammar learnability, even in the studies conducted by the EFL baccalaureate students in other contexts.

4. Research Questions

The study pursued students' answers to the following list of four questions:

- As per your experience this semester, how was the English language textbook useful to you in learning grammar?
- As per your experience this semester, what were the challenges you faced when you used the English language textbook to learn English grammar?
- How did you increase your learnability of English grammar this semester?

- What are your recommendations for new diploma students to better learn grammar?

5. Research Design

5.1. Methodology

This is a qualitative study that uses descriptive approach towards expressing students' viewpoints and experiences in learning grammar this semester, and thus achieves the objectives of the study by providing a better understanding of these viewpoints and learning experiences, because qualitative data focuses on naturally occurring, ordinary events, in their natural settings (Flick, 2009). It is used to collect information from real student life in close proximity to a specific context and to analyze the underlying issues, which gives qualitative data advantage over quantitative data (Creswell, 2012). Due to the incorporation of structured interviews for the participants in this study, the qualitative method is most suitable because it aims, as claimed by Flick (2009) and Gray (2009), to gain a deep overview of the context of students' perceptions toward their experiences in learning English grammar this semester. Another reason is that unlike quantitative methodologies that tend to generalize findings, qualitative researchers prefer to conduct a study that is 'authentic' by delivering results that are reliable and trustworthy within a specific context (Gray, 2009; Johnson & Christensen, 2012). The study consists of the results from ten structured interviews, where the subjects were ten randomly sampled male students.

5.2. Participants

The sample of this study was ten Saudi Arabian diploma students from Umm Al-Qura University who agreed to share their experiences in learning grammar using the English curriculum of the applied College as a start point but added to their learnability by additional efforts that don't match the methodology of the textbook. Seven of the participants had face-to-face interviews while three had online ones on Webex.

5.3. Data Collection

The researcher conducted a series of structured interview sessions with target participants. Various data sources were used to verify and do cross-checking based on the observations from several sources for data collection. The researcher used a list of four questions to conduct a structured face-to-face interview for about thirty minutes with each of seven participants, while online interviews were performed with three others on Webex when the semester ended and diploma students had their vacation. Furthermore, impulsive questions and prompts were also used for getting more thoughtful distinction in the data collected. The interview questions were formulated based on four factors, namely, both the strengths and weaknesses of the English curriculum in learning grammar, the extracurricular activities and personalized tools the students worked out individually to learn grammar, and students' recommendations for new comers to learn grammar in the same programs based on their experiences. The list of interview questions was validated by two expert professors in the area of teaching English as a foreign language at Umm Al-Qura University in Saudi

Arabia. An mp3 recorder was used to record the seven face-to-face interviews while auto recording was activated during the three Webex ones. For all the interviews, the interview transcripts were kept for data analysis.

5.4. Data Analysis

The analysis of data is essential in a qualitative study. Therefore, the interviews were recorded and the responses of the participants were transcribed and double-checked with the initial transcripts for verification. Transcription was based on the interview responses and observations. The qualitative data was analyzed on an individual-by-individual basis, then the responses were combined to consider similarities and differences. Furthermore, data from each question was organized, and the responses of the participants were compiled within four main fields: positive perceptions, drawbacks, solutions and recommendations as per their experience studying grammar that semester. In order to evaluate qualitative data from various outlets over the period, the constant comparative approach was adopted. The results represented diploma students' perspectives on how they learned grammar in the first semester. The research context is Umm Al-Qura University, located in Mecca City in the western region of Saudi Arabia.

6. Limitations

The limitations of this study include the limited number of interviewed students. They were from different programs but at the same university and college- all at the diploma level. Furthermore, the nature of the research makes it qualitatively-oriented. The findings might be supported in the future with more studies with a bigger number of participants from different academic disciplines in a variety of Saudi universities, but this limited study opens windows for future researches on the topic.

7. Findings of the Research

The four aspects of this study as per its structured interview questions were the strengths, weaknesses, extracurricular activities, and recommendations coming from students' experiences upon learning grammar through the deductive method applied in their English language textbook. The analysis of the data collected from participants showed their positive attitudes towards their grammar learning experience using a deductive method, and the main benefits were straightforwardness, comprehensibility, meeting instructor's expectations, building up learner's self-confidence, self-learning, enjoyableness, time-effectiveness and building grammatical skill. In contrast, the findings also include a number of drawbacks related to obstructing fluency, difficulty to achieve a dual task on rules and free practice of EFL at the same time, attracting attention to rules rather than use of language, and the challenges some learners faced to learn the rules. The following are the four interview questions, along with quotes from the responses of participants to each one.

7.1 As per your experience this semester, how was the English language textbook useful to you in learning grammar?

The findings indicated positive attitudes toward using the deductive method to learn grammar, as the majority of respondents stated that it was easy, direct, interesting, skill-building and achievable to some extent. The following quotes show these points:

‘I enjoyed my grammar lessons very much and learned a lot.’

‘It was clear, simple and easy to learn the rules.’

‘The most important thing was that I enjoyed the Language at Work section to make simple sentences and check others for mistakes.’

‘Sometimes, it saved my time to know the rules first.’

‘The quick explanation of my instructor helped me in application and practice.’

‘...you don't have to ask the teacher all the time because you can check the rule.’

‘I just needed to follow my teacher's instructions to use the the rule.’

‘If I was unable to understand a point or do an exercise, I went back to the rule very easily.’

‘I liked it when I followed the rule and my instructor thanked me.’

‘Because I had the rule very simply, I could follow it in the practice File section and learned more.’

7.2 As per your experience this semester, what were the challenges you faced when you used the English language textbook to learn English grammar?

The study findings showed that there are some weaknesses in using the deductive method by introducing rules first. The list of disadvantages, challenges and difficulties included complaints about obstructing fluency due to the difficulty to work on rules and practice at the same time, and sometimes drawing students' attention to rules rather than use of language. In other cases, respondents raised the issue of the challenges they faced to learn the rules and start their language learning from that point. Others encountered a level of intimidation or frustration to use the language lest they should make mistakes. The following quotes present these points:

‘It was difficult to think about the meaning and rules before I use English.’

‘I needed a lot of free practice to speak English without my fears of making mistakes.’

‘I made sentences more slowly at the beginning because of the rules.’

‘It took me time to think if my sentence followed the rule or not before I said it.’

‘Understanding the rule was easy, but using it was confusing.’

‘I needed to check for grammatical mistakes before I spoke or wrote.’

‘It was a big problem to follow rules to use English.’

‘I could use the rule in class but not outside.’

‘It was not good to make mistakes. I’m not good at learning rules and I used English to learn from my mistakes.’

‘I could learn fast but the rules stopped me.’

7.3 How did you increase your learnability of English grammar this semester?

The findings indicated that while the advantages of the deductive method encouraged students to learn grammar, its disadvantages enticed them to find new ways for self-learning, interesting extracurricular activities that appeal to today’s generation, and other resources for natural exposure to the use of English grammar in real life situations. The list of practical solutions students used to improve their English grammar learnability included keeping a simple grammar book with lots of illustrations and simple explanation, reading in English, writing a daily journal, watching YouTube videos of English in use, listening to dialogues and simple conversations covering general topics and using the same rules they learned, using a grammar application on their smartphones, using English with each other, practicing English to communicate with their families and friends on a daily basis, learning phrases or sentences rather than separate words, and watching English movies and TV series. The following quotes demonstrate these points:

‘YouTube videos were very helpful.’

‘Listening to simple conversations helped me a lot and now I can use English without fear.’

‘For me, it was a good way to use an application to check what I wanted to say and I learned a lot from it.’

‘I used English to talk with my family and friends.’

‘The most important thing was to learn English as phrases and expressions or complete sentences to use in situations, not words that you needed to put in sentences.’

‘I used Simple Grammar in Use to learn more about grammar.’

‘Keeping a journal helped me but it was full of mistakes at the beginning.’

‘I read a simple English story every day.’

‘We had an idea to use English only in class.’

‘TV saved me because I like watching English films and series.’

7.4 What are your recommendations for new diploma students to better learn grammar?

While some participants raised issues about challenges they faced with the deductive method of learning grammar this semester as presented earlier, most of them stated that it was useful in many ways and provided the list of benefits as responses to the first question

of this research. Furthermore, all the ten respondents agreed that even the challenges turned into new opportunities for self-learning and creative ideas to use extracurricular ideas to better learn grammar and overcome the challenges they suffered from. The following quotes include some of suggestions and recommendations the participants would like to share with new comers to study the same English course in the future for better learning and more learnability of English grammar whether inside or outside classroom:

‘You can find a lot of help on the Internet if you watch simple YouTube English Videos and clips.’

‘I advise new students to watch movies and series on TV.’

‘Listen to simple conversations to improve your English in general including grammar.’

‘From my experience, write a short paragraph in a diary or journal about what you did every day’

‘It is not a problem if you use a simple grammar book you can understand its rules and exercises.’

‘I advise you to read a simple English text like a short story every day.’

‘Instructors and students should use English only in class.’

‘There are grammar applications to help you learn and use grammar.’

‘You should communicate with your family and friends in simple English.’

‘If you learn English as phrases and expressions; this will help you make complete sentences faster.’

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of the study showed that the EFL students participating in the study held positive attitudes towards learning grammar through the deductive method applied in their English language textbook. The list of benefits included straightforwardness, comprehensibility, meeting instructor's expectations, building up learner's self-confidence, self-learning, enjoyableness, time-effectiveness and building grammatical skill. On the other hand, the weaknesses emerging from their challenges and individual experiences were mainly obstructing fluency, difficulty to achieve a dual task on rules and free practice of EFL at the same time, attracting attention to rules rather than use of language, and the challenges some learners faced to learn the rules. It was strange that while time efficiency emerged as one of the advantages of the deductive method of learning grammar, other participants complained about having to spend more time to think about meaning and rules of grammar at the same time. Based on the personal experiences in dealing with the book, the respondents used extracurricular activities and resources that they found very instrumental, and raised a number of suggestions and recommendations for new students to come to their programs in particular and to EFL learners in general. The following table illustrates the strengths and weaknesses stated by the respondents in response to the four questions of the structured

interviews, as well as one list of both the extracurricular activities they found very instrumental in learning grammar and accordingly the recommendations they want to share with EFL learners:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ straightforwardness ▪ comprehensibility ▪ meeting instructor's expectations ▪ building up learner's self-confidence ▪ self-learning ▪ enjoyableness ▪ time-effectiveness ▪ building grammatical skill 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ obstructing fluency ▪ difficulty to achieve a dual task on rules and free practice of EFL at the same time ▪ attracting attention to rules rather than use of language ▪ the challenges some learners faced to learn the rules
Extracurricular Activities and Recommendations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ watching YouTube videos ▪ listening to simple conversations ▪ using grammar applications ▪ speaking English with family and friends ▪ learning English as phrases and expressions rather than words then sentences ▪ using simpler grammar books with illustrations ▪ keeping a journal on a daily basis ▪ reading simple linear texts such as short English stories ▪ using English only in class ▪ watching English films and series on TV 	

Table1. Summary of Findings

Munna and Abul Kalam (2021) stated that the teaching and learning process can be defined as a transformation process of knowledge from teachers to students, and teachers need to understand the need and preferences of the learners because it is essential to enhance student engagement through active learning. Therefore, education is a combined teaching and learning process, and not only teachers' perceptions should be considered but also and more importantly those of the learners themselves. Furthermore, the educational context should be student-focused and student-oriented, not teacher-centered. However, the deductive method emphasizes the role of teachers and EFL textbooks in teaching grammar to non-native speakers through content following the deductive method without taking students' viewpoints, challenges, individual differences and successful experiences into account. In light of the positive and negative findings of this study, the deductive method proved to be instrumental in EFL grammar learning but it was also recommended that the extracurricular activities and the recommendations students revealed and suggested in this

study should be used in teaching and learning of English grammar in EFL courses inside and outside Umm Al-Qura University.

The researcher recommends that further studies on the same topic should be carried out in other Saudi universities for verification and comparison, as well as on other aspects and language skills of English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia and in other countries, with more focus on students and learning EFL rather than teachers and teaching, for more instrumental, realistic, student-friendly EFL methodologies.

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