

EFL high school students' attitudes towards English grammar teaching

Le Thi Tuyet Hanh¹, Le Hong Phuong Chau²

¹ Email: hanhfran@gmail.com

² Email: phuongchau3916@gmail.com

Vinh University

ABSTRACT: *This study is an attempt to investigate EFL students' attitudes towards grammar teaching in a high school in Vietnam. To complete the study, 80 tenth graders participated in the study. Data were collected from a five Likert-scale questionnaire and focus group interview. The results indicate that high school students were aware of the importance of grammar and grammar learning and they also favored teacher-centered teaching methods relating to grammatical knowledge. From the findings, many pedagogical recommendations are put forward.*

KEYWORDS: Grammar, grammar learning, grammar teaching, perception, high school students.

→ Received 08/12/2020 → Revised manuscript received 15/3/2021 → Accepted 25/3/2021.

1. Introduction

Since grammar is an essential aspect of English learning, English language teaching needs to focus more on this linguistic element. According to Jean & Simard (2011), grammar learning helps improve students' language accuracy, leading to effective communication. However, teaching grammar used to be weakened its role in the communicative approach, where EFL students are encouraged to communicate without paying much attention to grammatical mistakes. The fact that information cannot be successfully conveyed without grammar seems obvious; consequently, focusing on the form has recently re-gained attention from educators in the world (as cited in Le Van Canh & Barnard, 2009). Teaching grammar effectively is still a problem to be solved in different educational institutions, including Vietnamese schools. Even though English is reported to be taught in a traditional way in many studies (Khuong, 2015; Ho & Binh, 2014; Le Van Canh & Barnard, 2009), EFL students seem to face quite a lot of troubles with grammatical knowledge. According to Lee (2019), "this conventional focus-on-form approach has been criticized for demotivating students and failing to help learners develop communication skills" (p.4). In addition, grammar-related studies have mostly paid their attention to EFL teachers' grammar teaching, teachers' belief and attitudes, few have been conducted to investigate learners' attitudes towards such grammar classrooms. This study was carried out in an attempt to examine EFL students' belief and attitudes towards grammar learning and teaching in a high school. From the findings, some pedagogical implications are suggested with a view

to improving English teaching quality in Vietnam.

2. Literature review

2.1. Grammar teaching

English language teaching has seen divisive grammar instruction debates and its effectiveness on the progress of EFL learners in terms of competence. Hinkel (2002) once argued that the system of grammar-translation, regarded as one of the earliest grammar manuals, omitted contact practices and interactions between learners and learners, as well as between learners and teachers. Consequently, grammar teaching was neglected for a period of time in the past, resulting in a number of EFL learners who have little grammatical knowledge and even EFL teachers who are not able to teach grammar effectively (Payton, 2013). More recently, Richard & Reppen (2016) considered grammar teaching as a means to help EFL learners' communication. They also indicated that grammar should be taught in meaningful contexts communicatively, not in isolation.

In Vietnam, grammar instructions are likely to attract less attention from educators and researchers. According to Le Van Canh & Barnard (2009), explicit grammar guidance and error correction were found as two desired emphases in the language teaching process in Vietnam. On contrary, Ngo (2009) suggested teaching grammar through a discovery-based approach with implicit grammar instruction, along with a communicative approach, may also increase the acquisition of grammar and learning motivation by learners. In recent research, Khuong

(2015) proposed that grammar lessons remain important to retain the PPP (Presentation-Practice-Production) process, but further enhancement should be taken into account in order to teach the grammar elements through communicative tasks concurrently with context. Even though grammar teaching is likely to dominate most English classrooms in Vietnamese schools, Vietnamese students' English proficiency remained limited (Nguyen, 2018). Phuong and Nhu (2015) indicated that teachers still emphasized on grammar accuracy and written structures in their test-oriented teaching, as a result, few opportunities were given for students to practice their speaking and listening skills. According to Phuong (2017), Vietnamese learners mainly focused on memorizing grammatical rules and practising grammar-related-tasks, leading to their poor performance in proficiency tests.

2.2. Perceptions of grammar teaching

Investigating EFL teachers and learners' perceptions of English language teaching, including grammar teaching, has been viewed crucial as Büyükazi (2010) indicated that people's opinions influence their awareness, language learning trends, strategies, learning and teaching policies. Although much research has been conducted to find out EFL teachers' perceptions and attitudes on grammar instruction (Barnard & Scampton, 2009; Borg, 2006; Borg & Burn, 2008; Richards, Gallo & Renandya, 2001), very few have been done in the Vietnamese context. Lewis & McCook (2002), in a small part of their study reported that Vietnamese teachers suggested that grammar explaining in a traditional way was important in their teaching process. Le Van Canh & Barnard (2009), in their survey research, examined EAP teachers' attitudes toward grammar teaching. The findings revealed that Vietnamese teachers considered grammar "a central feature of language and a crucial element of their pedagogy" (p. 261). Another study by Khoi Mai Ngoc & Iwashita (2012) indicated that there was a significant difference between teachers and students' perceptions of grammar instruction, more specifically EFL teachers favored communicative grammar teaching, while their students preferred receiving a traditional teaching method.

From the literature view, it is seen that not many related studies were carried out in the Vietnamese context. Moreover, the majority of studies focused on EFL teachers' attitudes and beliefs, only one so far was conducted to investigate EFL learners' perception of grammar teaching. Keeping in mind that learners'

voices are important in the educational procedure, this survey study is conducted to reach that goal in the hope that the findings can complement the body of previous studies and contribute significantly to the improvement of English language teaching.

3. Methods

3.1. Research questions

- What are EFL students' attitudes towards the role of English grammar?
- What are EFL students' attitudes towards their grammar learning?
- What are EFL students' attitudes towards English grammar teaching?

3.2. Participants

The study involved 80 high school students at Tan Hung High School in Long An. All the participants were 10th graders. There were twenty-four male students and twenty-six female students. The participants' ages ranged from fifteen to sixteen years old.

These participants were following a 7-year English program, compiled by Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training. The selected participants were of equal qualifications. They were well informed about the requirements of the study. All participant data was collected in September 2020.

3.3. Research instruments

3.3.1. Questionnaire

This questionnaire consists of 24 questions, purporting to investigate students' attitudes towards (1) the role of English grammar, (2) English grammar learning and (3) English grammar instructions. This tool was adapted from Tantowijaya's (2016) 5-Likert-scale questionnaire for his thesis, which ranges from 5 for "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The reliability in terms of Cronbach's alpha is 0.8. Due to participants' limited English proficiency, the questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese language. The participants needed about 20 minutes to complete this questionnaire.

3.3.2. Focus group interview

Six questions were prepared for the focus group interview, with 10 students, aiming at (1) clarifying some intriguing responses from the questionnaire and (2) deepening the findings relating to the three mentioned factors. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted about an hour. To support learners, the language used in the interview was Vietnamese.

Data were collected by note-taking and recording; then analyzed and presented accordingly on the three chosen topics.

3.4. Data collection procedure

This survey research started at the second week of the first term with the questionnaire distribution. The selected students were informed about the purpose of the study and the researcher was there to explain any ambiguous statements in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was then collected and analyzed through SPSS software (version 2.0) and clearly presented in tables. Any unclear feedback from the questioned items was highlighted to identify candidates for the focus group interview, helping to shed light on the students' attitudes toward grammar learning and teaching. Three weeks after the questionnaire completion, the focus group interview was conducted and recorded. Finally, the triangulation of both the quantitative and qualitative findings was made, giving a deep understanding of EFL students' attitudes towards grammar instructions.

4. Findings, discussion, and implications

This study was carried out to investigate EFL high school students towards English grammar teaching. The following results are presented into three sub-sections in order to answer three research questions.

4.1. Findings

4.1.1. Students' attitudes towards the role of English grammar knowledge

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to show the general perceptions of students based on three-scale assessment

questionnaire (22 items). Table 1 below presents the findings for the first research question.

The results from Table 1 show that all students agreed with the determinant and basic role of grammar for their English learning in different skills. However, the respondents remained neutral to the statement "Grammar is a tedious job but it helps me in writing" with the mean of 3.1, equivalent to the scale "neutral" in the questionnaire. Besides, it was found that students did understand the role of grammar and its necessity in communication, with a mean of 3.7, corresponding to the "agree" scale. They were also aware of the importance of grammar practice, which received the highest mean score of 3.9. However, the standard deviations are quite big, meaning that the responses were largely dispersed.

Data from the focus group interview helps strengthen the findings from the questionnaire in terms of students' awareness of the prominent role of grammar in their English communication. Take Student # 6's answer as an example:

It is very important for the speaker to use the correct grammar in order for the listener to understand what the speaker is saying. Sometimes we don't communicate directly with each other, we only communicate by phone or through chatrooms, which makes it difficult for us to understand what the speaker means if he uses incorrect grammar.

In short, grammar knowledge was perceived as useful by EFL students in this study, to the

Table 1: EFL high school students' attitudes toward the role of grammar

No	Statements	Mean	SD
1.	Grammar is a tedious job but it helps me in writing.	3.1250	.91740
2.	Grammar study is the basis of fluent English.	3.6875	1.03239
3.	I like studying grammar because grammar has made my writing easier and more enjoyable.	3.6375	.87692
4.	Grammar learning is effective for fostering my reading ability.	3.5875	1.07209
5.	Grammar study is the basis of my listening ability.	3.4750	1.13287
6.	Grammar study is the basis of speaking ability.	3.6500	.90489
7.	Learning grammar produces language knowledge that I can use in natural communication.	3.7125	.77040
8.	My language improves quickly if I study and practice English grammar more often.	3.9375	.87340

Table 2: EFL students' attitudes towards grammar learning

No	Statements	Mean	SD
9.	I generally like the study of grammar.	3.6375	.90838
10	I need to be consciously aware of a structure form and its function before I can use it proficiently.	3.6375	.97881
11.	When I figure out the grammatical rules by myself, I can remember those rules for a long time.	3.5625	1.08820
12	I can learn grammar through exposure to language in natural use.	3.6875	.91264
13	I can improve my grammatical accuracy through frequent practice of structures in the classroom.	3.9250	.98051
14	Participating in real-life tasks with language is the best way for me to develop my grammatical knowledge.	3.7000	.84933
15.	Doing explicit discussion of grammar rules with other students is helpful for me	3.8375	.77908
Total		3.7222	0.911551

extent that it improves their English skills and effectiveness in communicating with others. The lack of full control of grammatical elements was mentioned as negative influence on their interactions in English language.

4.1.2. EFL Students' attitudes towards their grammar learning

Seven statements in the questionnaire were used to collect data relating students' attitudes towards their learning of grammatical elements. Table 2 below shows the results analyzed from students' responses.

As can be seen in Table 2, the results indicate that there was an agreement between them regarding the extensive practice and explicit focus for their effective grammar learning, with a mean total of 3.72. More specifically, "frequent practice" (Q13), "participating in real-life tasks" (Q14) and "exposure to language in natural use" were considered useful for students' grammar studying, with the mean scores of 3.92; 3.70; 3.68 respectively. On the other hand, participants in this study evaluated conscious attention to grammatical knowledge (Q10, Q11, Q15) as helpful activities in learning grammar. Learning grammar rules received the lowest mean score (3.56).

4.1.3. Students' attitudes towards effective grammar teaching

The following table presents the results from the quantitative data. There were

From the above table, it can be seen that the total mean score of successfully perceived grammar teaching among students is 3.56, slightly equivalent to the 'agree' scale. The highest score (M = 4.16) shows that learners valued teachers' explicit guidance for a better grammar application as well as a way of improving their lesson comprehension (Q24). That is why it is easily understood that a disagreement is seen at Q.21 (M=2.23). In addition, other 'explicit explanation'-related statements were quite highly appreciated (Q.16, Q.17, Q.22). As quantitatively suggested, it is likely that students preferred teacher-centered methods of grammar teaching to student-centered ones, with the low mean scores (M=3.31) at the statement "*I am excited when the lecturer asks students to figure out the rules from a discussion with classmates*" and memorization method seems not to be appreciated by the respondents.

The above quantitative findings were confirmed by the qualitative outcomes. All ten interviewees expressed their appreciation towards direct instructions from their teachers in English classes.

4.2. Discussion and implications

This section discussed the main findings from the study and put forward equivalent implications for educators, teachers and learners to enhance their learning-teaching process.

The results from data analysis show that EFL high school students did aware of the crucial

Table 3: EFL students' attitudes towards grammar teaching

No	Statements	Mean	Standard deviation
16.	There should be more formal study of grammar in the English language class.	3.5500	1.05175
17.	I think that Grammar should be taught functionally, not scholastic and based on memorization.	3.6500	.70755
18.	Through the teacher's explanation, I can understand English grammar better.	3.8000	.93321
19	I learn English grammar better when the teacher gives me explanations of grammatical rules before I do the exercises.	4.1625	1.01850
20.	I am excited when the lecturer asks students to figure out the rules from a discussion with classmates.	3.3125	.96653
21	In my opinion, grammar explanations given by the teacher to students are not helpful.	2.2250	.90148
22	Explicit grammar explanations given by the teacher makes me do not forget the learnt grammar easily.	3.7750	.90148
23	I learn grammar successfully if it is presented within a complete text by the teacher.	3.6125	.79863
24.	Lecturer's explicit teaching helps me to understand the lesson better.	3.9750	.90838
Total		3.5640	0.909723

role of grammatical knowledge in their English language learning. Moreover, they were unsure of the complicated features of grammar learning. However, the scores from high school exit test of English and from findings from other studies (Nguyen Thi Lanh, Pham Luong Giang, Nguyen Thi Phuong Thao, 2018) indicated a low score from grammar-dominated tests. The findings are in line with Khoi Mai Ngoc & Iwashita (2012). These imply that EFL teachers have been successfully raised their students' attention to the significant contribution of grammar in their English competency; nevertheless, more appropriately planned teaching activities need to be taken into considerations.

It was also found that EFL high school learners emphasized on an extensive practice of grammatical tasks in a natural context. The fact that Vietnamese learners have less exposure to interact with foreigners can be used as an explanation. One pedagogical implication is that schools and teachers should create more English-friendly zones, i.e English Speaking Zones, English extracurricular activities, etc. Additionally, the reasons why some students were interested in learning grammar are revealed from the interview data, consisting of the need for becoming a good English teacher or desire

to communicate with foreigners efficiently. It can be understood that learning grammar is not as boring as it was believed. This is consistent with Jarvis and Atsilarat (2004); Khoi Mai Ngoc & Iwashita (2012); Matsuura et al., (2001); Le Van Canh and Barnard (2009).

Another finding that emerged from the study is that the participants appreciated teachers' explicit instructions of EFL teachers in many ways. This is in line with results from Khoi Mai Ngoc & Iwashita (2012), in which EFL students preferred a traditional teaching method of grammar. As found in Le Van Canh and Barnard (2009), explicit grammar teaching was a preference among EFL Vietnamese teachers. As a result, there is likely to be a match between EFL Vietnamese teachers and students in terms of favorite grammar teaching methods. This leads to another inference that the lack of grammar control of EFL learners seems not to stem from the method of teaching. More related research should be carried to answer this question.

5. Conclusion

This survey study aims at examining EFL high school students' attitudes towards grammar instructions. It focused on three main factors included the role of grammar; grammar learning

and grammar teaching. This study is not void of some limitations, such as the limited number of participant, study setting in only one high school in the South of Vietnam, which are the reasons why further studies should be conducted before the findings are generalized.

Despite the mentioned limitations, the present study contributes significantly to (1) enrich the body of literature relating to grammar teaching and learners' perceptions, which seems to be

neglected by researchers for a decade; (2) raise stakeholders' awareness of explicit grammar teaching, even in the communicative approach and (3) attract EFL teachers and educators' attention to their customer learners' expectation during the English learning process. It suggests that different actions should be taken in order to improve the quality of English language learning and teaching.

References

- Barnard, R., & Scampton, D. (2009). Teaching grammar: A survey of EAP teachers in New Zealand. *New Zealand Studies in Applied Linguistics*, 14, 59-82.
- Borg, S. (2006). *Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice*. London: Continuum.
- Borg, S., & Burns, A. (2008). Integrating grammar in Adult TESOL classrooms. *Applied Linguistics*, 29(3), 456-482.
- Cam, T.H.K (2015). Teaching grammar communicatively: Theories, principles and implications in English teaching in Vietnam, *International journal of English language teaching*, 2(2), 68-76.
- Canh, L.V & Barnard, R. (2009). Teaching grammar: a survey of teachers' attitudes in Vietnam, *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 6(3), 245-273.
- Jarvis, H., & Atsilarat, S. (2004). Shifting paradigms: from a communicative to a context-based approach. *Asian EFL Journal*, 6(4). Available at www.asian-efl-journal.com/Dec_04_HJ&SA.pdf.
- Khoi, M.N & Iwashita, N. (2012). A comparison of learners and teachers' attitudes toward communicative language teaching at two universities in Vietnam, *University of Sydney papers in TESOL*, 7, 25-49.
- Lewis, M. & McCook, F. (2002). Cultures of teaching: Voices from Vietnam. *ELT Journal*, 56(2), 146-153.
- Matsuura, H., Chiba, R., & Hilderbrandt, P. (2001). Beliefs about learning and teaching communicative English in Japan. *JALT Journal*, 23(1), 69-89.
- Nguyen, H. T. (2018). English-medium-instruction management: The missing piece in the internationalisation puzzle of Vietnamese higher education. In *Internationalisation in Vietnamese Higher Education* (pp. 119-137). Cham: Springer.
- Phuong, H. Y. (2017). Improving English language teaching in Vietnam: Voices from university teachers and students. *Current Politics and Economics of South, Southeastern, and Central Asia*, 26(3), 285-310.
- Phuong, L. N. T., & Nhu, T. P. (2015). Innovation in English language education in Vietnam for ASEAN 2015 Integration: Current issues, challenges, opportunities, investments and solutions. *ASEAN Integration and Role of ELT*, 104.
- Tantowijaya, Y.P. (2016). *An analysis of students' attitudes towards grammar instruction*. Unpublished master thesis, Soegijapranata Catholic University, Semarang