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## Through the eyes of prospective teachers of English: explicit or implicit grammar instruction?

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### Abstract

Grammar teaching, which plays a central role in the EFL classroom, has been one of the most controversial issues in the field of foreign language research. Thus, there is an increasing need to investigate how prospective English language teachers perceive and practise grammar teaching. The purpose of the present study is to probe the general perceptions of Turkish prospective teachers of English about grammar and their preferences for the type of grammar instruction (i.e., implicit or explicit). The participants of the study include 86 pre-service EFL teachers studying in the English Language Teaching Department of Balikesir University. They have enrolled in the course *Teaching Practice* in the spring semester of 2013-2014 academic year. In this descriptive study which employs a quantitative research design, a four-point Likert-type questionnaire adapted from a previous study is used for data collection. The data obtained from the questionnaires are analyzed descriptively using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16. The findings of the study show that the majority of prospective English teachers regard grammatical knowledge as important and useful especially for fostering students' English writing and reading abilities. With regard to the type of grammar instruction, they seem to favor the implicit instruction over the explicit one. Hence, it can be suggested that language teaching should center on authentic and real-life oriented tasks rather than superficial practices that are consciously designed with the aim of teaching grammar.

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### 1. Introduction

Grammar teaching still remains a popular field of research in empirical and practical terms in the area of foreign language learning despite the inconstant language teaching methodologies (Başöz & Aydın, 2011; Kaçar & Zengin, 2013). It involves "any instructional technique that draws learners' attention to some specific grammatical forms 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" (Ellis, 2006, p. 84). Although grammar instruction has been a thorny issue among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers and methodologists, it has held and continues to hold a central position in language teaching (Ellis, 2006). The question of how to teach grammar is often the primary concern for EFL teachers. Therefore, it is crucial that prospective English language teachers regain a sense of what kinds of grammar teaching strategies best facilitate learning in the classroom so as to orient their teaching towards a practical and successful approach.

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The ongoing debate about how to assist EFL learners in attaining grammatical proficiency revolves around the implicit versus explicit dichotomy. According to Scott (1990), "an explicit approach to teaching grammar insists on the value of deliberate study of grammar rule in order to recognize linguistic elements efficiently and accurately" whereas "an implicit approach suggests that students should be exposed to grammatical structures in a meaningful and comprehensible context in order that they may acquire, as naturally as possible, the grammar of the target language" (p. 779). When we look at the research history in this field, we can clearly see that researchers give different opinions regarding explicit versus implicit grammar instruction. White (1987), for instance, emphasizes that grammar teaching is necessary as some structures cannot be learned naturally. According to Krashen (1982), on the other hand, grammar is acquired naturally and it does not have to be explicitly taught. By challenging conventional views of grammar teaching, Larsen-Freeman (1995) suggests that instruction is essential to enhance the acquisition of grammar and to speed up the process even if grammar is naturally acquired. Bourke (1996) points out that an implicit approach, whereby learners are encouraged to look for regularities in the target language input and formulate rules for themselves, is a more successful method.

Up to now, much of research has focused on the relative effectiveness of explicit and implicit grammar instruction. In most of the studies (Akakura, 2009; Andrews, 2007; DeKeyser, 1995; Doughty, 1991; Ellis, 1993; Ellis, Loewen & Erlam, 2006; Han, 2012; Hunter, 1996; Morgan-Short et al., 2010; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Radwan, 2005; Robinson, 1996; Rosa & O'Neill, 1999; Scarcella, 1996; Schneider, 1993; VanPatten & Oikennon, 1996), explicit and implicit instruction were compared with respect to their effectiveness on EFL learners' success in grammar. However, little research (Wang, 1999; Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Al-Kabani, 2004; Borg & Burns, 2008; Thu, 2009; Altunbaşak, 2010; Kaçar & Zengin, 2013) has been carried out regarding the perceptions of grammar instruction and preferences on the type of grammar instruction (i.e., implicit or explicit). In his research study, Wang (1999) investigated student and teacher attitudes towards grammar instruction in Taiwan. The result of the study demonstrated that most of the students preferred explicit method of instruction and that most teachers also favored and used the explicit method in their classes. Burgess & Etherington (2002) conducted a study with 48 teachers in British university language centers in order to probe teachers' attitudes towards grammar teaching. A five-point Likert type attitude scale was given to the participants. It was found that the majority of teachers see grammatical knowledge as important for their students and support a favorable attitude to explicit method. In a study surveying the perceptions of preparatory and secondary school EFL teachers and students, Al-Kabani (2004) reached the conclusion that students showed a more favorable attitude towards grammar instruction than teachers and that students preferred explicit instruction whereas teachers favored implicit instruction. Borg & Burns (2008) attempted to investigate the beliefs and practices about the integration of grammar reported by 176 English language teachers from 18 countries. The participants expressed strong beliefs in the need to avoid teaching grammar in isolation and reported high levels of integration of grammar in their practices. The study of Thu (2009) probed English as a second language (ESL) teachers' beliefs in grammar teaching. 11 ESL teachers in a language school in California were given a questionnaire. The results of the study demonstrated that the teachers generally believe that the formal study of grammar is essential to the eventual mastery of a foreign or second language. The participants also believed that grammar should be taught explicitly, not implicitly.

Applied in EFL context in Turkey, the study of Altunbaşak (2010) aimed to investigate the beliefs of Turkish teachers of English on the role of grammar and grammar instruction. The participants included 98 English teachers at primary and high schools. The findings of the study suggested that the majority of Turkish teachers of English believe that formal grammar teaching has a value in language learning and helps language development. In a recent study conducted in EFL context in Turkey (Kaçar & Zengin, 2013), the perceptions and classroom practices of Turkish pre-service teachers of English were examined. A questionnaire was given to 44 senior students studying at the Department of English Language Teaching at an English-medium state university in Turkey. The results of the study showed that the pre-service teachers seem to have adopted a holistic perspective towards teaching grammar, embracing both explicit and implicit grammar instruction.

As aforementioned, little research has been conducted on grammar teaching from the perspective of prospective teachers of English. Considering the lack of research studies related to grammar teaching in the Turkish context, the present study aims to contribute to the related literature by investigating the general perceptions of Turkish prospective teachers of English about grammar and their preferences for the type of grammar instruction (i.e., implicit or explicit).

## 2. Methodology

Eighty six prospective teachers of English studying in the ELT Department of Balıkesir University, Turkey participated in the study. They enrolled in the course Teaching Practice in the spring semester of 2013-2014 academic year. As a necessity of the course, the participants were assigned to a mentor teacher at the teaching practice state schools in the province of Balıkesir. Some of them were assigned to primary schools while others were assigned to high schools. The course Practice Teaching included five teaching tasks of 40-minute classes, and one assessed teaching session. The mentor teacher at the teaching practice school and the course instructor at the university evaluated the teaching tasks together. The data collection instrument consisted of a four-point Likert-type questionnaire, adapted from Al-Kalbani (2004), who had designed the instrument based on the studies of Burgess and Etherington (2002); Schultz (2001); and Wang (1999). The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was calculated as .83 which indicated that the scale was highly reliable (Özdamar, 2004: 633). The questionnaire included 29 statements grouped into two sections; general perceptions of English grammar instruction (Statements A1-A12), and perceptions about the

types of instruction (Explicit instruction, Statements B1-B11; Implicit instruction, Statements B12-B17). The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed descriptively using the SPSS software. Paired samples t-test was conducted in order to make a comparison between the participants' perceptions of explicit and implicit grammar instruction.

### 3. Results

The findings obtained from the data are divided into two subsections: prospective English language teachers' general perceptions of English grammar instruction and their perceptions about the type of grammar instruction (i.e., implicit or explicit).

#### 3.1. Prospective English language teachers' general perceptions of English grammar instruction

According to the mean scores and percentages presented in Table 1, it can be concluded that prospective English language teachers mostly have positive perceptions about English grammar instruction. To begin with, an overwhelming majority believed that giving students more opportunities for communication practice leads them to naturally understand English grammar (95.3%). 91.9% of the Turkish prospective teachers of English stated that grammar study helps students to get high scores on the English examination. They also agreed that grammar study is effective for fostering students' English writing ability (82.5%) and reading ability (69.7%) while they disagreed that grammar study is the basis of students' listening ability (81.4%) and speaking ability (80.2%). This suggests that prospective English language teachers have the belief that there is a strong link between one's writing ability and grammatical knowledge. Nevertheless, the participants believed that grammar study slows down students' English communicative competence (76.7%) and they found learning grammar useless as students can't apply grammar knowledge to spontaneous conversations with others (69.7%). That is, in the prospective English language teachers' view, communication practice should precede grammar instruction. 76.7% of the participants also disagreed with the idea that students generally like the study of grammar and 74.4% did not believe that there should be more formal study of grammar in the English language class. As a final point, 71% of the prospective teachers of English agreed that students' language improves quickly if they study and practise English grammar whereas 69.8% did not regard grammar study as the basis of fluent English.

Table 1. Prospective English language teachers' general perceptions of English grammar instruction

	Frequency (%)					Standard deviation
	Totally disagree	Disagree	Agree	Totally agree	Mean	
N=86						
A12. Giving students more opportunities for communication practice leads them to naturally understand English grammar.	-	4.7	43.0	52.3	3.47	0.74
A7. Grammar study helps students to get high scores on the English examination.	2.3	5.8	54.7	37.2	3.26	0.67
A5. Grammar study is effective for fostering students' English writing ability.	3.5	14.0	58.1	24.4	3.03	0.72
8. Grammar study slows down students' English communicative competence.	3.5	19.8	48.8	27.9	2.63	0.78
A11. Learning grammar is not very beneficial as students can't apply grammar knowledge to spontaneous conversations with others.	3.5	26.7	39.5	30.2	2.96	0.84
A1. Students' language improves quickly if they study and practise English grammar.	5.8	23.3	51.2	19.8	2.84	0.80
A6. Grammar study is effective for fostering students' reading ability.	7.0	23.3	58.1	11.6	2.74	0.75
A2. Students generally like the study of grammar.	16.3	60.5	19.8	3.5	2.10	0.70
A3. Grammar study is the basis of fluent English.	23.3	46.5	29.1	1.2	2.08	0.75
A4. There should be more formal study of grammar in the English language class.	27.9	46.5	20.9	4.7	2.02	0.82
A9. Grammar study is the basis of students' listening ability.	19.8	61.6	17.4	1.2	2.00	0.65
A10. Grammar study is the basis of speaking ability.	29.1	51.2	18.6	1.2	1.91	0.72

3. 2. Prospective English language teachers' perceptions about the type of grammar instruction (i.e., implicit or explicit)

With respect to the comparison between prospective English language teachers' perceptions of explicit and implicit grammar instruction, the findings presented in Table 2 indicate that implicit instruction received the highest rating with a mean of 3.10 while the mean score for explicit grammar instruction was 2.69. As a result of the paired samples t-test, it was found that there was a statistically significant difference between prospective English language teachers' perceptions about explicit and implicit grammar instruction ( $p=.044<0.05$ ). It is obvious that prospective teachers of English place more importance on teaching grammar implicitly than explicitly. In other words, they have a strong preference towards implicit grammar instruction over the explicit one.

Table 2. The comparison between prospective English language teachers' perceptions of explicit and implicit grammar instruction

	Means	Std. Dev.	-t-	-p-
Explicit Instruction	2.69	.122		
Implicit Instruction	3.10	.364	2.686	.044

As shown in Table 3 below, the overall mean is 2.69 which shows that the prospective English language teachers are moderately but not very strongly in favor of teaching grammar explicitly. The item which received the highest mean is Statement 6 (*Students can improve their grammatical accuracy through frequent practice of structures in the classroom*) with a mean score of 2.98 whereas Statement 4 (*When I give students explicit grammar explanations they won't forget the learnt grammar easily*) obtained the lowest mean score ( $X=2.40$ ).

Table 3. Prospective English language teachers' perceptions of explicit grammar instruction

	Frequency (%)					
	Totally disagree	Disagree	Agree	Totally agree	Mean	Standard deviation
N=86						
B6. Students can improve their grammatical accuracy through frequent practice of structures in the classroom.	1.2	17.4	62.8	18.6	2.98	0.64
B9. Comparison and contrast of individual structures is helpful for students to learn grammar.	1.2	22.1	58.1	18.6	2.94	0.67
B2. Students learn English grammar better when I give them explanations of grammatical rules before they do the exercises.	8.1	18.6	58.1	15.1	2.80	0.79
B3. Giving students grammar explanations is helpful.	4.7	20.9	64.0	10.5	2.80	0.68
B5. My explicit teaching helps students to understand English grammar.	3.5	26.7	66.3	3.5	2.69	0.59
B11. Students need to be consciously aware of a structure's form and its function before they can use it proficiently.	5.8	37.2	38.4	18.6	2.69	0.84
B1. Through my explanations students are more able to understand English grammar.	2.3	32.6	59.3	5.8	2.68	0.61
B8. Explicit discussion of grammar rules by students is helpful for them.	7.0	27.9	59.3	5.8	2.63	0.70
B7. Students need conscious knowledge of grammar in order to improve their language.	5.8	43.0	44.2	7.0	2.52	0.71
B10. Teaching grammar produces language knowledge which students can use in natural communication.	12.8	34.9	45.3	7.0	2.46	0.80
B4. When I give students explicit grammar explanations they won't forget the learnt grammar easily.	9.3	46.5	38.4	5.8	2.40	0.74

As for the implicit grammar instruction, the overall mean score is 3.10 ranging from 2.52 to 3.50 (see Table 4). Statement 17 (*Participating in real-life tasks with language is the best way for students to develop their grammatical knowledge*) which promotes a more authentic way of teaching grammar received the highest mean ( $X=3.50$ ). Quite a large number of prospective English teachers (93%) are in total agreement that teaching language should center on real-life oriented tasks rather than superficial practices that are consciously designed with the aim of teaching grammar. Statement 12 (*I am confident that students*

can figure out the grammatical rules by themselves, without my explanation) obtained the lowest mean score of 2.52. This suggests that the pre-service teachers of English are not confident that students can figure out the grammatical rules by themselves, without their explanation.

Table 4. Prospective English language teachers' perceptions of implicit grammar instruction

	Frequency (%)					
	Totally disagree	Disagree	Agree	Totally agree	Mean	Standard deviation
N=86						
B17. Participating in real-life tasks with language is the best way for students to develop their grammatical knowledge.	2.3	4.7	33.7	59.3	3.50	0.69
B16. Students can learn grammar through exposure to language in natural use.	1.2	8.1	40.7	50.0	3.39	0.69
B14. When my students figure out the grammatical rules by themselves they can remember these rules for a long time.	3.5	14.0	32.6	50.0	3.29	0.83
B15. Students learn grammar successfully if it is presented within a complete text.	1.2	22.1	48.8	27.9	3.03	0.74
B13. I prefer asking students to figure out the rules from a discussion with classmates.	3.5	24.4	51.2	20.9	2.89	0.76
B12. I am confident that students can figure out the grammatical rules by themselves, without my explanation.	5.8	45.3	39.5	9.3	2.52	0.74

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

From the results it seems possible to make some inferences about the beliefs of this group of prospective teachers of English concerning grammar and grammar instruction. The majority of prospective English teachers represented here appear to regard grammatical knowledge as important and useful especially for fostering students' English writing and reading abilities. However, they overwhelmingly believe that communication practice should precede grammar instruction as they consider learning grammar useless unless it enables students to apply grammar knowledge to spontaneous conversations with others. With regard to the type of grammar instruction, the prospective teachers of English seem to favor the implicit instruction over the explicit one. In other words, they place more importance on teaching grammar implicitly than explicitly. The findings of the present study contradict the related literature (Wang, 1999; Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Thu, 2009; Altunbaşak, 2010) to a certain extent despite showing parallel results with those of some previous studies (Al-Kalbani, 2004; Borg & Burns, 2008). Furthermore, prospective teachers of English believe that participating in real-life tasks with language is the best way for students to develop their grammatical knowledge, which supports the previous research (Burgess & Etherington, 2002).

The results of the study provide some pedagogical implications for both pre- and in-service English teachers. Grammar study should definitely be included in the teaching of English in an appropriate amount and it should not be disconnected from actual language use. In accordance with prospective English teachers' beliefs, grammar instruction should not take the form of separate grammar lessons. It should be integrated into communicative activities. Hence, it can be suggested that language teaching should center on authentic and real-life oriented tasks rather than superficial practices that are consciously designed with the aim of teaching grammar. Besides, it should be kept in mind that there seems to be no single optimal approach to grammar teaching that can be applied in all contexts to all kinds of learners. Both implicit and explicit instructions can successfully be applied depending on the cognitive style of the learner and the language structure presented. Thus, teachers of English should adopt a holistic approach to grammar teaching including both explicit and implicit instruction.

The findings of the present study can be said to shed light into prospective English language teachers' positive perceptions concerning grammar teaching and their preferences for the use of explicit grammar instruction in EFL contexts. The study is significant in that the results can be used to draw some guidelines and develop new frameworks to enhance the quality of EFL grammar instruction in Turkey. It may also help other teachers to reflect on and examine their own perceptions of grammar teaching. Some limitations of this research include that the participants were restricted to 86 prospective English teachers studying in the English Language Teaching Department of Balıkesir University. Moreover, the scope of the study was confined to the descriptive data obtained from the questionnaire designed by Al-Kalbani (2004). Further research may focus on the problems English teachers encounter with respect to the grammar teaching process including pre- and in-service teaching programs in the context of Turkish EFL courses.

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