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## Pre-service Teachers' Attitudes Towards Grammar Teaching

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### Abstract

As grammar is an instrument to form meaningful sentences (Thornbury, 1999), grammar teaching is an indispensable part of English Language Teaching (ELT). This paper is mainly about the pre-service teachers' understanding of grammar teaching. A questionnaire was used to investigate the attitudes and opinions of pre-service teachers studying ELT in Balikesir University. The findings in general show that pre-service teachers show an affirmative attitude towards grammar teaching although they strongly believe that it should not be taught directly or overtly. Attitudes change depending on the age and purpose of the learners. It is also seen that there is a gap between the practice and theory the reason of which may be the testing policy in Turkish educational system.

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*Keywords:* Grammar instruction; teachers' attitude towards grammar; foreign language teaching

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### 1. Introduction

The role of grammar and how to integrate it into foreign language classroom are at the core of ESL and EFL learning and teaching context (Ellis 2001). Its vital importance has been accepted as a component of EFL teaching and learning. (Doughty & Williams 1998; Thornbury 1997, 1998). Rinvolucri and Davis (2008) asserted that "Teaching the grammar of English is not simply a question of handing our clear, linguistic information to the learners" (as cited in Lawrence & Lawrence, 2013). It's of the utmost importance that learners should have a chance to use language in a real interaction with competent speakers (Canale & Swain, 1980) but it's not probable to

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encounter such situations in Turkey. Therefore, teachers make use of different ways of teaching grammar through games, songs, visual aids, realia, etc. to make it a part of meaningful communication. As Terrell (1991) states that “The theoretical model that underlies the [cognitive] approach is that a language consists of a “set of rules” with an associated lexicon. It follows logically from the model that foreign language students must learn rules of grammar. The suggested sequence is: study a rule (usually with instructor explanation), practice a rule (in grammar exercises), and then apply the rule in meaningful interactions in the target language” (cited in Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011). After the Communicative Approach in the 1970s, a grammar-oriented syllabus has changed and grammar has lost its popularity shifting from rules to talks. Teachers often believe language learning cannot occur without grammar and learners build their knowledge upon it. Only after they get a generative basis, they will be able to use language appropriately (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011). Grammar teaching needs a new sight that shows it’s not a set of rules without employing it in a meaning interaction.

## 2. Background

Many studies have been done on grammar instruction, suggesting similar results. Ebsworth and Schweers (1997) observed in their study that learners studying English for academic purposes made use of grammar instruction more to develop greater accuracy. In addition, Schneider (1993) and Hunter (1996) found that explicit grammar instruction increased success in grammar tests. In their study on the attitudes towards the importance of teaching and learning English grammar in Latvia and Sweden, Wittgenstein & Philosopher (2007) results showed teachers in both countries had positive attitude towards the importance of grammar, stating that grammar was not the focal point of language instruction anymore though. Moreover, Gotsch & Stathis (2008) identify ESL/ELD teachers’ attitudes toward and perceptions of grammar instruction for English learners. The survey revealed that most respondents believe that English learners should receive direct instruction in the rules of grammar and writing conventions. In their paper, Nagaratnam & Al-Mekhlafi (2013) attempted to investigate pre-service student teachers attitudes towards the mode of grammar instruction (i.e., explicit or implicit) in the context of teaching English as a foreign language. The main findings of the study showed a positive attitude of the pre-service student teachers towards grammar instruction in general and a more favourable attitude towards the implicit approach than the explicit. In addition, in their study, Mai Ngoc & Iwashita (2012) compare Vietnamese learners’ and teachers’ attitudes towards Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in terms of four factors: grammar instruction, error correction, group and pair work, and teachers’ role. As in Turkey, most of the English language examinations are not skill-based but focus on linguistic competence at almost all primary and secondary level, and university entrance and graduation examinations. It is; therefore, considered that a good knowledge of grammar is a must to succeed in that kind of traditional testing methods (Mai Ngoc & Iwashita, 2012). It is seen that a great deal of studies were conducted on grammar teaching but limited studies have been conducted covering English language teachers’ beliefs and practices related to grammar teaching, and how and to what extent it should be taught in classroom setting. Therefore, the present study aims to shed light on the teachers’ attitude towards grammar instruction by looking for answers for the following questions:

1. Do EFL teachers believe that grammar teaching is important? Why or why not?
2. How do they think grammar should be taught and why?
3. To what extent do they think that grammar should be taught in language teaching?
4. How would they like to be taught grammar?

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Participants

The sample group of the study consisted of 75 pre-service teachers studying in the ELT Department of the Faculty of Education at Balikesir University. Fifty seven of the students were female (76%) and thirteen were male (24%). They were all in the age group of 21 to 30. They all had studied English in high school and attended the ELT department after they passed the Foreign Language Examination. They were all native speakers of Turkish. The students participating in the study were informed before, after and during the research process about the aims. The

participants were affirmed to be volunteers in the study.

### 3.2. Tools

The data collection instrument consisted of two parts, background questionnaire and open-ended questions. The background questionnaire interrogated the pre-service teachers about their gender and age. Open-ended questions included four research questions of the study. The participants were asked to write about their beliefs and attitudes towards grammar instruction. To conclude, the research was conducted qualitatively as the survey questions were used to gather data from the participants' point of view.

### 3.3 Procedure

The study employed a two-step procedure: data collection and data analysis. In data collection, the subjects were asked to write essay that focused on how and to what extent grammar instruction to be done if they believe grammar teaching is important. All the data were collected by the researcher. In data analysis, the data obtained from each subject were analyzed. The irrelevant statements were excluded in the limits of the research question that interrogated the attitudes towards grammar instruction. Finally, the data presented in numbers and frequencies in percent in four tables (See Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4).

## 4. Results

Table 1: Do you think grammar teaching is important and why?

Statements	Number	Frequency (%)
Grammar helps to use/learn the language better.	45	40,38
It is not important in oral communication.	19	18,27
Grammar is important for academic purposes and exams.	12	11,54
Language is more than structures and forms.	8	7,69
It is important to be competent in four skills.	8	7,69
Grammar prevents fluency in speaking.	6	5,77
It is important in Turkey because students are supposed to use language with correct grammar.	4	3,85
It is not important at all.	2	1,92
Total	104	100

Table 2: How do you think grammar should be taught and why?

Statements	Number	Frequency (%)
Grammar should be taught inductively, covertly and implicitly to make learning permanent.	35	33,65
Grammar should be taught in communicative contexts and dialogues.	15	14,42
Grammar should be taught through games, songs and videos.	9	8,65
Grammar can be taught both inductively and deductively depending on the students' ages and aims.	6	5,77
Grammar should be taught inductively to beginner and young learners to make learning unforgettable.	5	4,81
Grammar should be taught in a way covered by attractive topics and daily conversations.	5	4,81
Grammar should be taught integrated with other skills.	5	4,81
Grammar should be taught gradually and repetitively by practicing.	5	4,81
Deductive teaching of grammar is boring and challenging for both teachers and students.	5	4,81
If grammar taught deductively, students become demotivated.	3	2,88
Teacher should only give the rules when the students having trouble in understanding.	3	2,88
Teaching grammar inductively lowers students' anxiety level.	2	1,92
Grammar should be taught just like students' acquiring their mother tongue.	2	1,92
Although it should be taught inductively, teachers have to teach deductively because of the educational system in Turkey.	2	1,92
Grammar should be taught deductively.	2	1,92
Total	104	100

Table 3: To what extent do you think that grammar should be taught in language teaching?

Statements	Number	Frequency (%)
Grammar should be taught to the extent that allows meaningful communication.	24	32,88
Grammar should not be the focus in language teaching.	12	16,44
It depends on the learners' aim. If speaking is the main aim, grammar is not necessary. However, if writing is important, grammar should be taught intensively.	12	16,44
Much more time should be allocated to listening, speaking, reading and writing rather than grammar.	10	13,70
Grammar has vital importance to improve four skills so it should be given enough time.	9	12,33
As the education is exam oriented, grammar teaching should be the focus.	6	8,22
Total	73	100

Table 4: How would you like to be taught grammar?

Statements	Number	Frequency (%)
I would like to be taught grammar indirectly, inductively or covertly.	20	22,73
I would like to be taught grammar through enjoyable activities such as games, stories, songs, role plays, videos or problem solving activities.	16	18,18
I would like to be taught grammar with methods that focus on communication.	13	14,77
I would like not to memorize set of rules.	9	10,23
I would like to be taught grammar integrated with other skills.	7	7,95
I would like to be taught grammar in a meaningful context.	6	6,82
I would like to be taught grammar deductively. Rules and explanations are more useful for me.	5	5,68
I would like not to be taught grammar in a way that we had learned so far. It was deductive.	3	3,41
I would like to be taught grammar covertly in different topics.	3	3,41
I would like to be taught grammar with a lot of exercises and examples.	3	3,41
I would like to be taught grammar both deductively and inductively.	1	1,14
I would like to be taught grammar by interacting with native speakers.	1	1,14
I would like to be taught grammar through authentic texts, newspapers, articles and magazines.	1	1,14
Total	88	100

## 5. Conclusions

It is seen that pre-service teachers consider grammar as an efficient way of learning a language and state that learning a language is beyond grammar. While some of the participants do not believe that teaching grammar contributes to oral proficiency, few of the pre-service teachers stand up for grammar teaching for preparing the learners for educational reasons and formal assessments. In addition, pre-service teachers proclaim that grammar teaching promotes accuracy at the expense of fluency. Although the issue of “never teach grammar” is not supported by the majority, very few pre-service teachers are seen to obey the structural tradition in language teaching. They believe the theory that if learners discover rules on their own, they can acquire them better. Teachers are under the impression that contexts and dialogues that serve communication can promote grammar learning and think it is appropriate to teach grammar in an authentic way as in games, songs and videos. Few of them also point out that the type of teaching changes according to the needs and ages claiming for teaching of grammar inductively to young learners to retain. Furthermore, little but meaningful discrepancy exists between their attitudes towards grammar teaching as teachers and as students. Only few numbers of pre-service teachers promote deductive teaching of grammar as teachers while they accept that explicit grammar teaching works better for them in an academic study.

## 6. Discussion

Teachers' attitudes towards grammar are generally positive and they are in favor of teaching grammar integrated with skills in an implicit way. However, students' lack of motivation to make use of speaking and listening skills outside the classroom lead teachers to focus only linguistic competence by minimizing communicative elements (Mai Ngoc& Iwashita, 2012). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education attempts to change the system to make it more

communicative and skill-based with locally-written textbooks in new national academic curriculum. However, little has been changed because of grammar-based examinations. Fearing of negative wash back, teachers tend to practice more grammar-oriented classes (Ellis, 1996; Pham, 2004). In his study, Fox (1995) pointed out the effect of teachers' attitudes on their grammar instruction (cited in McClure, 2006). Therefore, it's important to take pre-service teachers' attitudes into consideration towards grammar teaching. As prospective teachers, it can be suggested that they tend to take their attitudes and beliefs into the classroom. The result of this study has a vision of what kind of grammar teaching takes place in classroom. These findings have implications for teacher education, pre-service student and in-service training, and curriculum review.

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