

Exploring Undergraduates' Perceptions of and Preferences for Grammar Teaching in EFL Writing Classes

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Abstract: Understanding learners' perceptions and preferences is critical in teaching, as individual differences can influence learning experiences and outcomes. Many studies have explored learners' perceptions of writing and educators' beliefs about suitable practices that accommodate students' needs. However, few studies have investigated undergraduates' preferences for the nature of grammar instruction in EFL writing. The present study aims to examine undergraduates' perceptions of and preferences for grammar instruction in writing classes. This study utilised a survey questionnaire to collect data from 30 first-year English Major students of the University of Dhaka who were selected through convenience sampling method. The quantitative data were later analysed using SPSS. We found that most undergraduates considered contextual grammar teaching and using authentic language learning materials for practice essential for EFL writing classes. Besides, they preferred inductive grammar teaching over deductive teaching techniques.

Keywords: Grammar instruction, learners' perceptions, learners' preferences, EFL writing

1. Introduction

There are significant debates about the efficacy of the instruction of grammar and error correction in the context of language learning (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004). Grammar enables us to communicate through language by labelling the components of sentences in any language. Our ability to construct sentences begins at a young age as a fundamental aspect of being human (NCTE, 2002). It is necessary to know grammar to understand the composition of sentences, including the types of words and word combinations. A deeper understanding of grammar can reveal much about the human mind and our incredible mental abilities (Barman & Basu, 2015).

So, there is a great necessity for the instruction of grammar. The primary rationale behind teaching grammar as a framework for sentence analysis and labelling has often been driven by the desire to achieve certain practical objectives, commonly centred on improving writing skills (Tüm, 2013). Before the 1970s grammar was an essential part of language instruction as it was believed that one would only be able to communicate well if one knew the grammatical rules of the language (Ghimire, 2016). This belief was challenged by the notion of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), which suggests

that only knowing the rules is not enough; students must learn how to apply them in practical situations. In this period, grammar was abandoned.

“Writing initiates a verbal transaction between a writer and a reader. Grammar bridges the transaction. When the bridge is broken, no transaction transpires. Correct grammar, then, is a non-negotiable requirement in writing” (Shamsuzzamam, 2019, para. 1). However, the debate on whether grammar should be taught explicitly through rules or implicitly through exposure to real-life language use has been ongoing (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Controversies between researchers and educators have been on about the focus on form and its use. Some talked in favour, and some challenged it. Numerous studies have been conducted on ‘the explicit focus on form and its place’ in language teaching and learning. Most of those studies addressed the educators’ beliefs about suitable practices and accommodating students’ needs (Shahani, 2012). However, the literature rarely touches upon students’ perceptions and preferences regarding grammar teaching in their writing classes.

In Bangladesh, students learn the English language from the elementary level (primary) as a mandatory subject (Bashir, 2016). So, they have twelve years of experience of learning English before enrolling at the undergraduate level. In contrast, studies show that Bangladeshi undergraduate students have poor English proficiency (Rahman, 2007, 2008; Saha & Talukdar, 2008; Chaudhury, 2009). That is why students are taught grammar in their first-year classes in most universities. While extensive research has been carried out on how to teach grammar in writing classes, there seems to be a gap in the literature when it comes to exploring the perceptions and preferences of undergraduate EFL students regarding grammar teaching in writing classes. This study aims to fill this gap. This study aims to investigate first-year students’ perceptions and preferences of grammar teaching in EFL writing classes. We expect the findings will help the instructors to think more deeply about the nature of grammar instruction in undergraduates’ EFL writing classes. Therefore, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do first-year students of the English department at the University of Dhaka view grammar instructions’ role in their writing classes?
2. What types of grammar teaching techniques do these learners prefer and why?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Approaches to Teaching Grammar

In traditional grammar teaching, grammatical structures are presented and practised separately. The term “grammar teaching” refers to any teaching technique that helps learners comprehend and internalise the meaning and/or production of a specific grammatical form. Ellis (2006) discusses several key methods of teaching grammar, including lessons with only presentation or practice, discovery learning, input exposure, and error correction during communication.

Numerous theoretical approaches have been developed to enhance students’ success in learning new information, including two that are frequently used in teaching

grammar: the inductive approach and the deductive approach. The deductive approach is a traditional and effective way of teaching grammatical rules or structures (Shirav & Nagai, 2022). Students learn the rules and then apply them. The deductive approach is primarily teacher-centric, with the teacher responsible for presenting and explaining new materials. In contrast, the inductive approach involves presenting grammatical structures in a real-world language context, enabling students to discover the rules through practical examples. The teacher provides context, and students learn the rules through examples and practice (Rivers & Temperley, 1978).

2.2 Studies on Perceptions of Grammar Teaching

Various studies have investigated the topics of focus, form, and error correction in foreign language classrooms, as well as teachers' perspectives on these practices (Ellis, 2002; Farrell & Patricia, 2005; Richards et al., 2001; Schulz, 1996, 2001). However, there is a dearth of research on students' beliefs about these practices in the context of ESL classrooms. Although studies on learner beliefs tend to focus on language learning in general, the role of grammar instruction in language learning has been the subject of numerous debates in the field.

Studies in foreign language learning have shown that students generally find error correction and grammar instruction beneficial for effective writing. Schulz's (1996) study of students' and teachers' views on error correction and the role of grammar instruction in a foreign language setting showed that many students have a more positive view of grammar instruction than their teachers do and that students believe that studying grammar is necessary to master a language (as cited in Sopin, 2015). According to Pazaver and Wang (2009), there exists a disparity between the perspectives of teachers and students on the efficacy of language learning methods. Specifically, a greater proportion of teachers hold the belief that engaging in simulated real-life scenarios for language practice is more advantageous compared to the explicit study of grammatical forms. Peacock (2007) drew attention to a number of discrepancies between teachers' and students' perceptions of learning a foreign language, which were also reported in Schulz's (1996) study. Moreover, grammar exercises and error correction were significantly more popular with students than with teachers, and teachers valued pair and group work more than students (Peacock, 2007). He concluded that these perception gaps had a negative impact on learners' progress, satisfaction, classroom experience, and confidence in their teachers.

Horowitz (1990: cited in Pazaver & Wang, 2009, p. 29) stated that students and teachers often perceive grammar differently, which can lead to negative consequences. Therefore, teachers should have a better understanding of students' beliefs about language learning, as Kern (1995: cited in Pazaver & Wang, 2009, p. 29) argues that recognising this mismatch is essential to understanding conflicts that are linked to low motivation or anxiety. Therefore, it's critical to understand what students think about the purpose of grammar instruction in writing instruction and how they like to learn grammar in their writing classes.

3. Methodology

This study utilised a quantitative research design involving the collection and analysis of numerical data to answer the research questions. The study was conducted in two phases: the first phase (Instrument) involved the development of a survey questionnaire, and the second phase (Data collection and analysis) involved the administration and analysis of the survey data.

3.1 Respondents

It is a study on first-year students of the Department of English, University of Dhaka. The questionnaire was administered to 30 students, and all of them properly participated in responding. It was decided to limit the survey to first-year students in order to provide a fairly homogeneous sample. In the first year, they have a course named “Course Eng. 101: Developing English Language Skills”, and the course content includes “reviewing language in use (grammar and vocabulary) and developing range and complexity with respect to writing and speaking demands”. In this study, all the participants speak Bangla as their mother tongue or native language. They are enrolled in an English literature and language undergraduate program at the Department of English. The subjects in this study were selected using the convenience sampling method.

3.2 Instrument

A questionnaire was designed to collect data in light of the research questions. The questionnaire (see Appendix for the questionnaire) used in this study consisted of three sections: The first section (Section-A) contained seven items on the students' perceptions of grammar teaching in their writing classes. In contrast, the second section (Section-B) contained nine items on the students' preferences for grammar teaching techniques. The questionnaire items were designed on a five-point Likert Scale for these two sections. Participants were instructed to express their degree of agreement with the item statements using a five-point Likert scale ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’ for each statement. The participants' responses were evaluated using a Likert scale, where a rating of ‘strongly agree’ was assigned a value of 5, ‘agree’ was assigned a value of 4, ‘neutral’ was assigned a value of 3, ‘disagree’ was assigned a value of 2, and ‘strongly disagree’ was assigned a value of 1.

The third section (Section-C) contained three open-ended questions where participants were asked whether grammar was taught in their classes and, if not, whether they wanted grammar to be taught in their classes.

The first section (Section-A) of the questionnaire used in this study was modelled on the instrument developed by Chen et al. (2016) to investigate students' perceptions of grammar teaching in their writing classes. Moreover, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with a small sample of first-year undergraduate students and later verified by some English language instructors to ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument.

3.3 Procedures of Data Collection and Analysis

The second phase of this study involved collecting data using the survey questionnaire. Later, the data generated from the questionnaire survey were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (version 20). Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were calculated for responses of each variable in order to find out the major perceptions and preferences of the participants about grammar teaching in their writing classes. The third section (Section-C) contained three open-ended questions. The responses to these questions were analysed using theme identification to provide insights into the research problem.

4. Results

Table 1 and Table 2 display the results of the questionnaire survey. The percentage, mean, and standard deviation are shown here.

Table 1
Students' Perceptions of Grammar Teaching in Writing Classes

| Items | N | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Total | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|-------|----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|------|----------------|
| | | % | % | % | % | % | % | | |
| 1 | 30 | .0% | 10.0% | 6.7% | 30.0% | 53.3% | 100.0% | 4.27 | .980 |
| 2 | 30 | 13.3% | 20.0% | 33.3% | 33.3% | .0% | 100.0% | 2.87 | 1.042 |
| 3 | 30 | 3.3% | 13.3% | 30.0% | 36.7% | 16.7% | 100.0% | 3.50 | 1.042 |
| 4 | 30 | .0% | 3.3% | 20.0% | 43.3% | 33.3% | 100.0% | 4.07 | .828 |
| 5 | 30 | .0% | 6.7% | 13.3% | 53.3% | 26.7% | 100.0% | 4.00 | .830 |
| 6 | 30 | .0% | 3.3% | 46.7% | 40.0% | 10.0% | 100.0% | 3.57 | .728 |
| 7 | 30 | 3.3% | 10.0% | 10.0% | 23.3% | 53.3% | 100.0% | 4.13 | 1.167 |

Note: N= number of participants, 1=strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree

Table 1 measures students' perceptions of grammar teaching in writing classes. The results showed that most students (53.3% strongly agreed and 30.0% agreed) believed that (item 1) grammar should be taught in schools and colleges. A good number of students replied that teachers should teach grammar in writing classes (item 3) and that teaching grammar improves students' English writing skills. Moreover, a majority (53.3% agreed and 26.7% strongly agreed) of students also think that grammatical instruction and practice help learners achieve greater accuracy in writing (item 5) and that language practice in real contexts is more important than grammar instruction in the classroom (item 7). The overall mean for this section is 4.27, which shows a positive stand towards grammar teaching and that grammar is important for learning and should be taught in schools and colleges.

Table 2
Students' Preferences for Grammar Teaching Techniques

| Items | N | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Total | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|-------|----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|------|----------------|
| | | % | % | % | % | % | % | | |
| 8 | 30 | 63.3% | 30.0% | .0% | 3.3% | 3.3% | 100.0% | 1.53 | .937 |
| 9 | 30 | 6.7% | 13.3% | 30.0% | 33.3% | 16.7% | 100.0% | 3.40 | 1.133 |
| 10 | 30 | .0% | 20.0% | 36.7% | 36.7% | 6.7% | 100.0% | 3.30 | .877 |
| 11 | 30 | .0% | 6.7% | 16.7% | 56.7% | 20.0% | 100.0% | 3.90 | .803 |
| 12 | 30 | .0% | .0% | 33.3% | 50.0% | 16.7% | 100.0% | 3.83 | .699 |
| 13 | 30 | .0% | 3.3% | 20.0% | 40.0% | 36.7% | 100.0% | 4.10 | .845 |
| 14 | 30 | .0% | 10.0% | 23.3% | 50.0% | 16.7% | 100.0% | 3.73 | .868 |
| 15 | 30 | .0% | 6.7% | 40.0% | 36.7% | 16.7% | 100.0% | 3.63 | .850 |
| 16 | 30 | 3.3% | 6.7% | 10.0% | 46.7% | 33.3% | 100.0% | 4.00 | 1.017 |

Note: N= number of participants, 1=strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree

In Table 2, students' preferences for grammar teaching techniques were measured. Nine items go under Table 2, and the results show that for (item 11), the majority of the students (56.7% agreed and 20.0% strongly agreed) believe that the teacher should present new grammatical rules in context so that the meaning is clear, and that the teacher should present the new form in a natural spoken or written text so that students can see its use in discourse (item 12). A good number of students believe that the teacher should give examples first so that the students can infer the grammatical rules. Moreover, a substantial number of students (40.0% agreed and 36.7% strongly agreed) acknowledged that they learn better when the context is given (item 13). The overall mean for this section is 4.10, which shows that students prefer to learn grammar contextually rather than theoretically. Therefore, Students prefer inductive teaching of grammar rather than deductive teaching.

In section-C, students were given three open-ended questions to know whether grammar should be taught in the first year at the university level. Twenty-two out of thirty students replied that they were taught grammar implicitly in the classroom, and in answer to the second question, most students said that grammar should be taught in first-year university classes. Here, an answer from a student can be mentioned; the student said, "I think grammar should be taught in first-year university classes because many students come from rural areas, and they do not have enough exposure to apply grammar rules in writing. Most of the students can solve grammatical problems in isolation; however, they do not apply them successfully in their writing." Similarly, most students said grammar teaching is necessary because it will make their writing more accurate and freer of errors. It will also help them to brush up on their basics.

5. Discussion

The findings of the analysis suggest that grammar instruction is a crucial component of writing classes for students, as it facilitates the development of their writing abilities. The majority of students surveyed expressed a strong agreement with the idea that grammatical instruction and practice contribute significantly to enhancing writing accuracy. Furthermore, the students generally held a positive view of grammar instruction in writing classes, although their preferences for specific teaching techniques varied. Many students deemed explicit grammar instruction unnecessary and ineffective, while others preferred a more frequent and direct focus on grammar in the classroom.

The students also reported that they learned best when grammar was contextualised, with new grammatical forms introduced in natural spoken or written texts to demonstrate their usage in real discourse. This finding is similar to a great extent to Hinkel (2004) and Dörnyei (2001); they suggest that incorporating engaging and relevant grammar activities can increase motivation among learners. A possible reason for this similarity might be when learners see the practical applications of grammar; they are more likely to be motivated to learn. In our study, many students preferred learning through examples that showed them how to use proper grammar. This method, called inductive teaching, is seen as very helpful. Moreover, a substantial number of students believed that it was sufficient to learn the grammatical rules themselves, with the teacher showing the rules first and then allowing students to practice applying them in their writing. Similarly, findings by Ellis (2002) and Fotos and Nassaji (2013) indicate that learners generally respond positively to instruction that embeds grammar in meaningful contexts. This contextualised approach is often preferred over isolated, rule-based instruction.

Many studies (Brown, 2007; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999) emphasise that communicative competence, which includes fluency and accuracy, is crucial in EFL contexts. Learners often prefer a balanced approach that emphasises both aspects. Our findings also focused on the effective inclusion of grammar instruction in writing classes to attain fluency and accuracy. Regarding awareness of grammar's importance, Larsen-Freeman (2001) suggests that learners recognise the importance of grammar in achieving effective communication. They acknowledge that proper grammar usage enhances clarity and understanding. The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of our study. One of the possible reasons for this consistency may be that the learners have a common goal, i.e., to achieve communicative competence. For feedback and correction, Ferris (2006) and Truscott (1996) highlight that learners appreciate focused and constructive feedback on their grammar errors. They value explicit correction strategies that help them understand and correct mistakes. However, our study did not cover this area.

Overall, the majority of students believed that grammar instruction should be provided in schools and colleges. When asked about the teaching of grammar in the first year of the university, many students felt that it would be beneficial to review and reinforce their previous knowledge of grammar and further improve their writing accuracy. In brief, the research indicates that students perceive grammar teaching as essential for effective writing and should be incorporated into writing classes throughout their academic journey.

6. Limitations of the Study

The study included a sample size of only 30 participants at a university. The sample size is moderate, as we have some constraints regarding time and budget. We believe that the study's relatively homogeneous sample will yield meaningful results. It would have been better if we had included a large sample from several universities. However, despite these limitations, the study concludes that grammar instruction is essential for enhancing writing skills and achieving greater writing accuracy, which is consistent with the widely held view. It is important to note that questionnaire-based studies may have some limitations in generalizing the results, for example, the interpretation of questionnaire items may vary, and the questionnaire designer may influence the research agenda. Therefore, it is suggested that open or semi-structured interviews followed by thematic analysis would have been more suitable for exploring complex issues involving experiences, feelings, and attitudes in this area. Due to time constraints, this study could not utilise these instruments. Hence, further research with more comprehensive instruments and a larger sample size, including multiple universities, is necessary. Such an approach would generate more dependable and generalisable results, ultimately leading to a more realistic portrayal of the situation.

7. Conclusion and Recommendation

As demonstrated by the findings of this study, students hold a favourable perception of grammar instruction in writing classes. They believe that incorporating grammar teaching is crucial for enhancing their writing skills and achieving greater accuracy in their written work. The inductive approach to teaching grammar is preferred over the deductive approach by the students. Furthermore, students perceive grammar instruction in first-year classes as beneficial, as it allows them to apply what they have learned in their writing courses. Therefore, students suggest that grammar instruction should be included in first-year classes.

Educators can utilise the findings of this study when designing teaching materials for writing classes (Salgado, 2003). Effective grammar instruction at the school and college levels would prepare students for the challenges they may face in higher education. Teachers may use visual aids to demonstrate grammar-related exercises and rules. Moreover, visual aids (e.g., short videos, images, etc.) can provide learning context and make grammar instruction attractive and practical. Error analysis can play an influential part in improving writing skills. The instructor may show the anonymous answer scripts that contain common mistakes that students commit while writing and ask whether they can identify and solve them. They may use pop culture, e.g., contemporary music, viral videos, interviews with celebrities, memes, conversations on social media, etc., which provide fertile ground for authentic language use. Moreover, using authentic materials such as advertisements, music, poems, and cartoons in the classroom can help students remember and retain examples ("How to Teach Grammar," n.d.). Besides, considering some issues like the objectives of the class, the learning background of the learners and the learning styles of each student bears paramount importance in any aspect of language teaching. If grammar instruction is necessary for first-year classes at the university level, it should be taught through authentic language materials and examples

rather than explicitly instructed. Teachers should incorporate contextual grammar teaching in their instructional strategies, as students learn best when provided with context. Moreover, teachers should consider their students' preferences for grammar-teaching techniques when designing instructional strategies for teaching grammar in writing classes. Further research is required to determine the most effective ways to incorporate these strategies into EFL writing classes for Bangladeshi EFL learners.

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Appendix
Questionnaire (Question Part only)

Exploring Undergraduates’ Perceptions of and Preferences for Grammar Teaching in EFL Writing Classes

Section-A: Students’ Perceptions of Grammar Teaching in EFL Writing Classes

| Questionnaire items | SA | A | N | D | SD |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|---|---|---|----|
| 1. Grammar should be taught in schools and colleges. | | | | | |
| 2. Grammar should be taught in universities. | | | | | |
| 3. Teachers should teach grammar in writing class. | | | | | |
| 4. Teaching grammar improves students’ English writing skills. | | | | | |
| 5. Grammatical instruction and practice help learners to achieve greater accuracy in writing. | | | | | |
| 6. The study of grammar can facilitate and speed up the grammar acquisition process. | | | | | |
| 7. Using authentic language learning materials in the classroom is more important than grammar instruction. | | | | | |

SA = **Strongly Agree**; A = **Agree**; N = **Neutral**, D = **Disagree**, SD = **Strongly Disagree**

Section-B: Students’ Preferences for Grammar Teaching Techniques

| Questionnaire items | SA | A | N | D | SD |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|---|---|---|----|
| 8. Teachers should teach grammar rules only. | | | | | |
| 9. The teacher should show the rules first and then let students practice. | | | | | |
| 10. I learn better when I know the rules first. | | | | | |
| 11. The teacher should present new grammatical rules in context to clarify the meaning. | | | | | |
| 12. The instructor should present the new form in the context of a natural spoken or written text so that students can observe its application in discourse. | | | | | |
| 13. I learn better when the context is given. | | | | | |
| 14. The teacher should present new structures from simple to complex. | | | | | |
| 15. The teacher should explain new structures with all the details and in a formulaic way. | | | | | |
| 16. The teacher should first give examples so the students can infer the grammatical rules. | | | | | |

Section-C: Students’ Thoughts on Grammar Teaching

| Questionnaire items | Responses (please specify) |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 17. Was grammar taught in your first year EFL writing classes at the university? | ----- ----- - |
| 18. If not, should grammar be taught in the first year EFL writing classes at the university? | ----- ----- - |
| 19. If yes, why should grammar be taught in first year EFL writing classes at the university? | ----- ----- - |
