

GRAMMAR TEACHING CHALLENGES IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Teaching grammar within the language education landscape presents an enduring challenge for educators. The ongoing debate surrounding the effectiveness of explicit versus implicit instruction underscores the dynamic nature of pedagogical practices in this field. To address this debate and gain a comprehensive understanding of grammar instruction, this research focuses on exploring the drawbacks of both approaches within educational institutions. By examining the practical implications of explicit and implicit instruction, this study aims to provide insights into their application in real-world teaching contexts. Through qualitative research method, faculty members from private institutions in Peninsular Malaysia were engaged in interviews, enabling them to share their first-hand experiences and perspectives on implementing these instructional methods. The findings from these interviews revealed three main challenges faced by educators when teaching grammar. Among these challenges, time constraints emerged as a significant hurdle, impacting the quality and depth of grammar instruction provided to students. Moreover, the research reveals further insights into the diverse requirements and preferences of students, as well as the diverse teaching approaches employed by instructors. Such insights are crucial for guiding the creation of personalized instructional approaches that meet the specific needs of learners in higher education contexts.

Keywords: *educators' beliefs; explicit grammar; grammar teaching, implicit grammar*

1. Introduction

In the Malaysian educational context, the teaching and learning of English as a second language have garnered increasing attention in recent years. This heightened focus is attributed to the recognition of English as a global language and its importance for various academic, professional, and social endeavours (Yusob, 2018). As a result, numerous studies have delved into various aspects of language learning, focusing particularly on the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—as well as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

Grammar instruction holds a significant place in language learning and teaching, as it serves as the foundation for effective communication in English (Kumayas & Lengkoan, 2023).

Hedge (2011) highlights the significance of grammar teaching that empowers students to proficiently use language, incorporating accurate grammatical structures, forms, and context. Nonetheless, the method of grammar instruction has been a topic of discussion and investigation within language education.

One approach to grammar teaching is implicit instruction, which integrates grammar learning with other language skills in a holistic manner. This approach emphasizes language fluency and communication, with grammar taught indirectly through meaningful language use (Groves, 2013). Implicit instruction encourages learners to engage actively in language tasks and promotes the acquisition of grammar through authentic communication contexts. In contrast, explicit instruction focuses solely on teaching grammar rules and structures in a systematic and direct manner. This approach aims to provide learners with clear explanations and opportunities for practice, with an emphasis on accuracy and precision in language use (Birsen, 2012). While explicit instruction may enhance learners' grammatical knowledge, it has been criticized for its potential to limit language fluency and communicative competence (Ling, 2015).

The current discourse in language education revolves around the continuum between implicit and explicit instruction, with educators grappling with the decision of how best to teach grammar to their students. This dilemma is particularly pertinent in the context of Malaysian higher education institutions, where English language proficiency is essential for academic and professional success. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the challenges associated with teaching grammar in Malaysian higher education institutions. By examining the perspectives of educators and exploring the issues surrounding grammar instruction, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on language pedagogy and inform the development of effective teaching practices in the Malaysian education system. Through a comprehensive understanding of these challenges, educators can strive to enhance grammar instruction and facilitate language learning outcomes for students.

2. Literature Review

Teaching English as a foreign language, particularly in underdeveloped countries like Malaysia, presents significant challenges (Yusob, 2018; Akbari, 2015). Despite English being integrated into the Malaysian curriculum and receiving substantial attention in our culture, achieving proficiency remains a hurdle. Proficiency in English is crucial for accessing modern technology, scientific materials, navigating the information age, efficient internet usage, and facilitating cross-national cultural exchange. However, studies, such as Behrooz and Amoozegar (2014), highlight shortcomings in English instruction, often attributed to an overemphasis on grammatical structure.

The methodology employed in teaching grammar plays a pivotal role in language learning outcomes. Ling (2015) criticizes traditional approaches characterized by explicit grammar instruction, where teachers focus on rote learning and drilling, often neglecting language fluency and real-world communication. Explicit instruction involves conscious learning and deliberate absorption of grammar concepts, favouring precision over fluency. However, experienced educators, as noted by Rodriguez (2009), still prefer clear grammar instruction despite acknowledging the benefits of repetition and error correction.

On the other hand, implicit grammar instruction, as described by Groves (2013), integrates grammar learning with other language skills in a communicative and participatory manner. Through exploratory learning and teacher-led examples, students indirectly acquire grammar skills, emphasizing language fluency over accuracy. Implicit instruction empowers

learners to become independent thinkers, akin to L1 learning, converting input into intake, as argued by Birsen (2012).

Each approach to teaching grammar comes with its own set of advantages and drawbacks, underscoring the importance of teachers' awareness of their pedagogical values. Educators must carefully consider the implications of their chosen instructional methods on language learning outcomes and tailor their approach to meet the diverse needs of their students (Lumentut & Lengkoan, 2021). By adopting a balanced approach that integrates both explicit and implicit instruction, teachers can create engaging and effective grammar lessons that promote both accuracy and fluency in language acquisition.

3. Research Method

3.1 Design

The qualitative research design chosen for this study aims to delve deeply into teachers' perceptions of the challenges encountered in teaching grammar. According to Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012), qualitative research is characterized by its focus on understanding the nature of relationships, activities, situations, or materials. It seeks to provide a comprehensive description of every aspect of a given phenomenon, in this case, the challenges in teaching grammar.

3.2 Sampling

In this study, the researchers have adopted a purposive sampling approach due to specific criteria required such as to select English language lecturers who specialize in teaching grammar instruction. Purposive sampling ensures that participants are chosen deliberately based on their expertise and experience in the subject matter, allowing for a focused exploration of the research topic. These educators are currently employed at private colleges located in Peninsular Malaysia, which are affiliated with higher education institutions that have more than 10 years English teaching experience. Purposeful sampling is a deliberate selection of samples based on specific units or situations, rather than being chosen randomly or spontaneously.

3.3 Instrument

The researchers have chosen semi-structured interviews as the primary instrument for data collection. This approach enables them to delve deeply into the participants' experiences and insights regarding grammar instruction. By employing semi-structured interviews, the researchers can ask open-ended questions while also having the flexibility to probe further into specific areas of interest. This method facilitates a rich and nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by educators in teaching grammar.

The justification for employing semi-structured interviews lies in their adaptability, which renders them less rigid and enables respondents to freely articulate their thoughts or concerns. This approach facilitates the development of richer themes, as it serves as a method for gathering comprehensive and detailed insights into participants' experiences and viewpoints on a particular issue (Turner, 2010), with the researcher serving as the primary data collection instrument.

3.4 Data Collection

Once the interviews are conducted and the data are collected, the researchers employ thematic coding analysis as their chosen qualitative research strategy. Thematic

coding involves systematically identifying recurring themes and patterns within the dataset. This process allows the researchers to organize and make sense of the vast amount of qualitative data gathered from the interviews. By identifying and analysing themes, the researchers can uncover the key difficulties encountered by educators in teaching grammar, as well as any common strategies or approaches they employ to address these challenges.

3.5 Data analysis

Overall, the combination of purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, and thematic coding analysis provides a rigorous and comprehensive framework for exploring the complexities of teaching grammar in Malaysian higher education institutions. This research method ensures that the insights gained from the study are grounded in the perspectives and experiences of knowledgeable educators, ultimately contributing valuable insights to the field of language pedagogy.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the data collection revealed that respondents encountered considerable challenges in integrating their beliefs into grammar instruction practices. These challenges have led teachers to become more discerning in their selection of grammatical techniques employed in the classroom. The difficulties identified include:

| | Challenges | Educator | | | | |
|----|--|----------|----|----|----|----|
| | | E1 | E2 | E3 | E4 | E5 |
| 1. | Time Restriction | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 2. | Varying materials and approaches | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| 3. | Diverse Students' Language Skills Levels | | | | ✓ | ✓ |

Table 4.1. Educators' Challenges of Implementing the Held Beliefs

a) Time Restriction

The findings reveal that the central obstacle encountered by all five educators is the scarcity of time. E1 highlighted a preference for explicit instruction, emphasizing its efficiency in saving time, particularly when managing a considerable number of students, which could occasionally exceed 80 per session. This sentiment was echoed by E3, who recognized the significance of incorporating various teaching methods and resources tailored to student preferences. However, E3 also encountered challenges in implementing these strategies within her classroom due to time constraints.

E1's preference for explicit instruction suggests that this approach allows for a more direct and focused teaching of grammar concepts, which may be more conducive to managing large class sizes. By providing clear rules and examples, explicit instruction streamlines the learning process and minimizes time spent on explanations and activities. In contrast, implicit instruction, which emphasizes immersive and experiential learning, often requires more time for planning and execution, making it less feasible for educators with limited time resources, as noted by E3.

E3's acknowledgment of the importance of utilizing diverse methods and resources underscores the pedagogical value of catering to students' individual learning preferences. However, despite recognizing this importance, E3 faced challenges in effectively integrating these strategies into her classroom due to time constraints. This suggests that while

educators may aspire to provide varied and engaging learning experiences, practical limitations such as time availability can hinder their ability to do so effectively. E2 provided additional reasoning for favoring explicit instruction by emphasizing the structured nature of grammar. This structured approach makes it easier for students to memorize grammar rules through repetition, which is often associated with explicit instruction methods. Essentially, students can learn grammar more efficiently through rote memorization when presented with clear rules and examples.

Building on this, E5 pointed out that implicit teaching involves more time-consuming processes, such as organizing group activities and utilizing various resources. In implicit instruction, the focus is on immersing students in language use through real-world contexts and communication activities. This approach requires more time for planning and execution as teachers aim to create authentic language learning experiences for their students. Furthermore, previous research by Groves (2013) has highlighted the time-intensive nature of implicit instruction. This method places a strong emphasis on communicative activities, where students engage in conversations, discussions, and collaborative tasks to learn grammar in context. As a result, implicit instruction tends to require more time for implementation compared to explicit methods, which typically involve direct instruction and practice of grammar rules.

b) Varying Materials and Approaches

Two educators highlighted the challenge of adapting materials and approaches to cater to diverse skill levels among students. This demands teachers to exhibit a high level of proactivity and creativity in crafting tasks suitable for different proficiency levels. Additionally, E4 mentioned her use of drilling exercises to cover grammar content efficiently within each class hour, alongside other English tasks. However, she pointed out the impracticality of having a class equipped with numerous teaching resources to meet every student's needs adequately.

Despite Rodriguez's (2009) assertion regarding the time-intensive nature of implicit teaching, educators generally acknowledge its benefits. However, there is a noticeable shift towards explicit instruction among teachers, driven by a desire to streamline instruction and enhance learning outcomes.

In contrast, Rasyimah, Sari, & Irawati (2022) found that lecturers predominantly assigned grammar exercises using deductive techniques followed by practice. However, students perceived the teaching as repetitive and overly reliant on the textbook. This discrepancy between the pedagogical approaches favored by educators and the perceived effectiveness by students underscores the importance of aligning teaching methods with student learning preferences.

c) Diverse Students' Language Skills Levels

The issue of students' varying skill levels poses a significant challenge for educators, as highlighted by two respondents. E4 points out that dealing with students who exhibit high levels of inhibition can impede both the learning process and student engagement. It becomes imperative for teachers to provide support to students with low proficiency levels while also monitoring high achievers to prevent complacency. On the other hand, E5 raises concerns about the potential demotivation experienced by students with lower proficiency levels when exposed to implicit grammar instruction, particularly in environments where they interact with more advanced peers.

Phipps and Borg's (2009) survey underscores the expectations of advanced students, who prefer a more expository approach to grammar instruction. The underscores challenge teachers to face barriers in translating their pedagogical strategies into practice, considering the diverse proficiency levels of their students. Despite the acknowledged benefits of implicit teaching, one respondent still opts for explicit instruction in grammar lessons to accommodate students across the proficiency spectrum, notwithstanding the findings of this study.

These insights underscore the complexity of addressing students' proficiency discrepancies within the classroom setting and the necessity for educators to adopt flexible and inclusive teaching methodologies to meet the diverse learning needs of their students (Kumayas & Lengkoan, 2023).

5. Conclusion

In summary, grammar presents a formidable challenge in language learning, as it is intricately linked to other language skills such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing. While grammar is particularly vital for spoken communication and comprehension, its mastery is essential for proficient language use overall. Consequently, educators' perceptions play a pivotal role and can serve as significant barriers for English teachers. This study emphasizes the importance of addressing educators' perceptions and recognized obstacles in language instruction. Rather than solely focusing on introducing general approaches to English language teaching, teacher education programs should place greater emphasis on supporting instructors in overcoming these challenges. By providing educators with the necessary tools and strategies to navigate the complexities of grammar instruction, teacher education programs can empower instructors to create more effective and inclusive language learning environments. In doing so, they contribute to enhancing students' language proficiency and fostering a deeper appreciation for the nuances of language use.

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