

## ESP Students' Views Of ESL Grammar Learning

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### Abstract

Grammar has always been viewed as playing an essential role in the success or failure of formal communication. This research will show that grammar education should be 'descriptive' rather than 'prescriptive' in order to offer students a set of choices to make them effective speakers and writers. The main objective of this study was twofold. First, it focused on students' views about a new grammar model that includes four stages: confrontation, clarification, confirmation and consolidation (CCCC) and students' perceptions regarding grammar learning in general. Second, it investigated the recurrent patterns of interaction during the process of learning grammar within the framework of the model. The subjects of this study were forty female students from three ESP for education classes in the UAE University. Three research instruments (a questionnaire, classroom observation notes and semi-structured interviews) were employed to establish data triangulation and to attain validity. The results from the collective data demonstrated that students had positive views about the use of the CCCC grammar model. Another crucial result highlighted the students' beliefs about the positive influence of explicit grammar teaching on learning the conventions of sentences and utterances. Finally, the study concluded with recommendations to direct future research.

**Keywords:** language, learning, grammar, perceptions, education.

### Introduction

Grammar is viewed as an essential element for communication to take place because it shows how language is used. The process of grammar teaching is more successful when it deals with grammatical points that can be used for communication (Nunan, 1991; Zhongganggao, 2001). Therefore, structuring the grammatical items according to certain orders such as from simple to difficult may not assist students who need to communicate using difficult structures that they have not studied yet. This means that grammatical structures are learned and used effectively when they are presented in contexts to serve communicative purposes. In this case, the design of the curriculum should deviate from the peculiarity of the traditional design which assumes that students can delay certain grammatical points for later stages. We may begin a program design by selecting the communicative aspects of language that students may need to use for different purposes rather than listing grammatical items that they should learn according to certain order. Hence, there is a vital need for a model of grammar instruction which emphasizes communication and the negotiation of meaning. A model of grammar instruction consisting of four stages: confrontation, clarification, confirmation and consolidation

starts with the search for materials that relate to language situations that students will encounter in the future. The first step for realizing communicative grammatical elements is the ‘contextualization’ of such features because context provides meaning for grammatical forms. Another important factor is that teachers should be aware of students’ learning styles in order to be able to develop suitable strategies and materials that can meet their interests and needs. Zhou (2009) argued that students have always been ignored and their views have not been always welcomed because educators and teachers often believe that students do not know their actual needs. In his study about Malaysian primary school teachers’ grammatical awareness, Munir Shuib (2009) argued that students’ grammatical competence and the assistance they received from teachers depend heavily on those teachers’ grammatical awareness. Undoubtedly, the more we are aware of what is perceived to be taking place in the classroom, the better our endeavor in assisting our students and improving the learning situation (Haukey, 2006). This perspective emphasizes the context within which the structures are introduced and the students’ needs and preferred learning styles. It is, therefore, understandable that from this perspective, transformation and substitution drills are ineffective tools for promoting communicative language use for real purposes. This study focused on the students’ views about the CCCC grammar model, their perceptions regarding grammar learning and the recurrent patterns of interaction.

### **Problem Statement**

Communication suffers a considerable breakdown in the absence of correct use of grammar. ESP instructors in the UAE University are aware that Emirati students are heavily exposed to ESL grammar during their study in schools but they face serious problems in using grammar correctly for conducting different academic tasks when joining universities. Therefore, one of the possible answers being considered is the abandoning of the traditional mode of teaching grammar and adopting a more communicative-oriented approach. Hence, it was crucial to investigate how students might be assisted and encouraged to develop their skills in grammar and produce appropriate texts which were academically acceptable in their specific disciplines. Trying a model of grammar instruction and investigating its impact on students’ views might assist in understanding the situation better and offer the necessary help for students to acquire the ability to produce grammatically correct language.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions for the study are:

1. How do students perceive the new grammar model (CCCC)?
2. What are the students’ perceptions regarding grammar learning?
3. What are the recurrent or repeated patterns of interaction regarding students’ communication with the teacher?

## **Literature Review**

The traditional approach of grammar learning is based on the behaviorists' belief about reinforcing and rewarding acceptable habits or performance (James & Vanpatten, 1995). Grammar was traditionally taught to ensure accuracy and correctness of sentences and utterances. Within this approach, grammar is introduced and taught as 'an end in itself' (Yarrow, 2007). Crystal (2004) referred to the instruction and place of grammar within the traditional approach as a 'discipline for the mind'. The traditional prescriptive ESL grammar approach starts with a list of grammatical items to be taught. It recommends that certain grammatical elements should be taught before others. However, Larsen-Freeman (1997) asserted that teachers may expose students to one grammatical structure at a time, but students may not learn that particular item before going on to learn a new one. The traditional approach presents a grammatical structure model that assumes once students have learned structure, their speech will be grammatically correct. However, though achieving grammatical accuracy on exams, students often will not be able to produce acceptable utterances spontaneously or communicatively (Ellis, 1997). In this regard, grammar should not be seen in isolation but in relation to communicating messages for real purposes. Thus, a discourse analysis approach should be employed to facilitate language teaching and learning.

Discourse analysis focuses on both the spoken and written modes of a language and the relationship between the language and the context in which it is used. Demo (2001) viewed discourse analysis as the way language is used by members of a certain social group. It assists in identifying linguistic, social and cultural elements which help people understand and interpret various kinds of texts and speech acts. A discourse analysis of written texts might address cohesion across sentences and the development of the subject matter, while an analysis of spoken language might focus on these aspects in addition to turn-taking as well as opening and closing a series of social activities (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). ESL teachers employ discourse analysis to better understand the recurrent discourse patterns used by students in their classes. It may also be used for creating opportunities for learners to come into contact with the foreign language and to develop an acceptable proficiency level in using that language. The underlying importance of this system for ESL/EFL teachers and curriculum developers is that it provides them with a map that helps in making decisions about what to teach and in what combinations.

The discourse analysis approach is based on certain assumptions about the teaching and learning of grammar in context. The first assumption is that grammar should be introduced to serve communicative purposes. Therefore, all grammatical features can be offered to all learners at different stages of their ESL/EFL learning. However, the amount of attention paid to each grammatical item in each stage will not be the same. Hence, the teaching of grammar can be more effective and natural when items that come together in communication or in a text are introduced at the same time. According to Larsen-Freeman (1997), the misunderstanding of the role of grammar is attributed to the fact that it is always viewed to be governed by fixed rules. A further issue is that the selection and organization of materials should be based on the needs and interests of students.

Grammar teaching in the area of second language acquisition has received a lot of attention in the literature. Researchers from different parts of the world conducted a number of studies to investigate key issues in the field of English grammar teaching and learning (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004; Ellis, 2006; Chen, 2006; Bos & Poletiek, 2008; Kinder & Lotz, 2009; Goh, 2009; Sue-Hi Ting et al. 2010). However, the area of students' perceptions of grammar learning has not been intensely investigated like the general field of teaching and learning grammar. The number of researchers who have focused on students' perceptions and beliefs regarding grammar teaching and learning is small, but includes Ikpia (2001), Richards et al. (2001), Schulz (2001), Hawkey (2006), Yarrow (2007), Zhou (2009), and Pazaver and Wang (2009).

In the area of grammar teaching and learning perceptions, Pazaver and Wang (2009) employed an interviewing technique to investigate ESL students' perceptions regarding explicit or direct grammar teaching and learning. Seven male and nine female immigrant students who came to Canada from China, India, Sri Lanka and several countries in the Middle East participated in the study. The findings demonstrated that there were differences in students' perceptions regarding explicit grammar teaching. Their perceptions of grammar teaching and learning varied widely since they came from different cultural and educational backgrounds. Farrell and Lim (2005) investigated and compared the beliefs and actual classroom practices of two experienced English language teachers in relation to grammar teaching in a primary school in Singapore. Different areas and practices of grammar teaching were examined and discussed as well as the main factors that have influenced the teachers' actual classroom practices and beliefs. The findings suggested that teachers' beliefs were not always consistent with their actual action in the classroom.

Some other researchers investigated how the use of technology might affect grammar learning. Along the same line, Al-Jarf (2005) conducted a study to find out whether the integration of online learning in face-to-face in-class grammar instruction considerably improves EFL freshman college students' achievement and attitudes. Two groups of freshman students participated in the study. The results of the post-test revealed significant differences between the experimental group and control group in the area of grammar-learning. This finding suggested that the experimental group benefited from both online and in-class instruction procedures. The findings also revealed that even passive participants in the experimental group made more progress than students in the control group. Another technology-related study was carried out by Yoon (2008) to investigate how corpus technology influences the development of students' competence as second language writers. This qualitative research was mainly based on case studies with six ESL writers who were studying an ESP writing course. The findings revealed that the use of corpus technology not only had power in assisting students to work out immediate writing and language problems, but it also aided in developing their perceptions of grammar and at the same time it helped promote language awareness.

### **The Grammar Model**

The idea of the CCCC's model was partially based on Sysoyev's (1999) model which included three stages: Exploration, Explanation and Expression. Sysoyev's model was based on integrative grammar teaching which probably involves both form and meaning (Spada & Lightbown, 1993). However, The CCCC's model employed both integrative grammar and communicative language teaching. It presupposed students' interaction while learning. The model included four stages. In the first stage (*Confrontation*) each student works independently to read a text, to underline the grammatical features of the text as directed by the teacher or by the task, and to think about questions to ask while in the second stage (*Clarification*) students are asked to work in groups to check and discuss their findings and try to formulate the grammatical rules. In the third stage (*Confirmation*) the teacher brings the class together to discuss their answers and seek confirmation from the teacher for their findings. In this stage the teacher provides explanation and clarification for the grammatical rules. In the final stage (*Consolidation*) students are instructed to practice the new structure. For example, they may be asked to retell or rewrite a story and later they may be asked to find similar stories with the same grammatical features.

### **Methodology**

#### **Instruments**

Classroom observation, semi-structured interviews with students, and a questionnaire were used for the purpose of data collection. The utilization of these three instruments helped in triangulating the data and obtaining validity. The use of the semi-structured interviews allowed some flexibility to deal with any important point that emerged during the interview sessions. The questionnaire was developed and refereed by a number of university instructors and it was reviewed, adjusted and restructured as a result of the referees' comments and feedback. The questions of the semi-structured interview were also reviewed and refereed by a panel of instructors in the UAE University to check that they matched the themes of the questionnaire, research questions and whether they could produce supportive data. A number of tables for facilitating grammar learning were also used to help students proceed smoothly through the assigned tasks, gain confidence, and recognize and use certain grammatical structures.

#### **Participants**

Forty female students from three different ESP for Education classes in the UAE University participated in this study. All these students were following their bachelor degree in different fields in the Faculty of Education in order to become elementary school teachers. In their second year and after passing three general English courses in the University General Requirements Unit, the students took the IELTS exam. Their level of language proficiency for this study was determined by those scores as well as by a writing test that was administered at the beginning of the semester in which the study began. Only seven students scored 5.0 or 5.5 in the IELTS and the rest of them managed to score 4.5, which was the minimum requirement for taking courses in the College of Education, including the ESP for Education course.

### **Data Collection**

Certain measures were taken into consideration to minimize distortion of the natural flow of the classroom. Thus, the researcher did not start using the new model with the target classes until after the first four weeks had elapsed. The purpose of delaying the introduction of the model was to allow enough time to establish good rapport with students. The process of data collection lasted for nearly two months. The questionnaires were distributed and collected from all forty students. The researcher, who was the instructor of the ESP for Education course at the time of the study, collected classroom notes while students were doing grammar activities which were designed and assigned in accordance with the model. The interviews were conducted with about six students from each class.

### **Data Analysis**

The nature of the qualitative approach employed allowed the researcher to continue collecting data during the data analysis stage. The interview procedure helped the researcher collect supporting data while analyzing and describing the results. This flexibility of data collection and analysis was due to the nature of the methodology employed which was interactive, reactive or cyclical in nature (it allowed the researcher to go forward and backward when analyzing the data and also to collect more data when necessary) (Weade & Green 1989). The nature of the collected data directed the researcher to mainly employ a qualitative approach to analyze the data (Creswell, 2003, 2005). However, a quantitative approach was used to quantify the qualitative data and obtain frequency and percentages in order to understand and analyze all variables more efficiently. Consequently, a framework was created to categorize the data into themes in order to facilitate the analysis process (Holliday, 2002).

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was intended to investigate the students' views about a "grammar model" that they followed during class activities to learn ESL grammar. It also investigated students' recurrent pattern of interaction when communicating with the teacher. It was not the intention of this study to investigate the students' progress during the grammar class. Mapping out students' progress or achievement may be carried out in a further study in the future.

### **Results and Discussion**

The answers to the three research questions will be discussed and referred to within the relevant data where appropriate. The data collected via the three instruments will be analyzed and interpreted in relation to the research questions. Table 1 summarizes the results of the three main components or themes of the questionnaire. It shows that a considerable number of students (35%) indicated that they could take responsibility for their learning when they were working cooperatively in doing different tasks. This result demonstrated that many students were in favor of the new grammar model as it allowed them to work together and assume responsibility for their own learning. However, 12% of the total number of students strongly agreed that working cooperatively was not relevant to their favorite learning style as they could be more productive when they work

on their own. This low result provided evidence related to the second research question about students' learning styles and their perceptions of learning grammar.

There was also substantial evidence from the cumulative data analysis (see Table 1) that many students believe that learning explicit grammatical rules is essential for understanding the conventions of sentences and utterances. This result was not surprising since many of those students had been studying EFL by following such procedures and strategies for a number of years. Those students were mostly from high schools where many teachers might still believe in the effectiveness of explicit grammar teaching and the role of the teacher as the main source of information. This result is in accordance with the result reported by Schulz (2001) about students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the role of explicit grammar and corrective feedback in foreign language learning. It was reported that students strongly believed that explicit grammar instruction could play a positive role in foreign language learning. Students indicated clearly that they preferred to be taught in that way as the formal study of grammar helped them keep the rules of grammar in mind when they wrote in a foreign language or when they read what had been written by others or by them. Although students in the present study indicated that formal grammar instruction was very important, they also believed that mastering the grammatical rules of the language was not a pre-condition for communication to take place. Those students believed that they could communicate their messages effectively on campus or in other places, such as shopping malls, without following the grammar rules.

Table 1: Cumulative results of the three main components of the questionnaire

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		No Opinion		Total	
	Fre- quency	%	Fre- quency	%	Fre- quency	%	Fre- quency	%	Fre- quency	%	Fre- quency	%
Respon- sibility & coopera- tion	14	35	12	30	7	17.5	4	10	3	7.5	40	100
explicit instruct- tion	12	30	15	37.5	7	17.5	3	7.5	3	7.5	40	100
self- instruc- tion	5	12.5	16	40	9	22.5	7	17.5	3	7.5	40	100

During classroom observation and interview sessions some of these students showed a great deal of confidence in articulating and expressing themselves using their limited language proficiency. When asked whether grammar was important for communicating with others, some students stated that it was important to learn grammar in order not to be afraid when speaking with the English teacher. This point is in accordance with Pazaver and Wang (2009) who concluded that it is very important for teachers to be aware of their students' perceptions about the role of grammar in language learning in order to be able to meet their needs. They suggested that the gap between teachers and students' beliefs might be closed by creating a dialogue between the two parties. Another similar result

was reported by Zhou (2009) about learners' views about improving grammar and vocabulary in their writing for academic purposes. Zhou (2009) reported that learners were found to be motivated to improve the grammar and vocabulary of their writing but they lacked the necessary strategies to take an appropriate action to achieve their goals. A number of students in the present study pointed out that they need to learn grammar in order to avoid making mistakes:

- A. I need to be good at grammar so I won't make mistakes  
I won't be afraid when I chat with my English teacher  
I am not afraid from other teachers  
They listen to me and they understand me
- B. I got good grade when I write projects in English  
They do not underline mistakes or ask me to write it again

Other students indicated that they need to learn grammar in order to write their assignments with good English and to avoid getting all their work marked with red. In her study, Goh (2009) reported that Chinese EFL learners think too much about the structure of the language and they had the misconception that they had to produce perfect sentences. This result is in accordance with what the students in this study expressed about grammar learning. Students expressed their apprehension to use the language correctly and satisfy their teachers who were continuously putting a lot of pressure on them to learn grammar rules and produce error-free texts. One student stated:

I feel bad when my teachers use red pen  
I do not know what my mistakes are  
When my teacher only underlines them  
I write homework to other teachers  
I got good mark because I don't make mistakes  
Perhaps, they do not correct English

The above extract indicates that students have fears and concerns about the correction of mistakes by their teachers. This is similar to what Yarrow (2007) reported in her study about students' feeling of grammar. She indicated that students expressed negative feelings and attitudes toward the approach that was always used to mark their grammar work. She argued that students can become more cautious and frustrated if we continue to mark students strictly without considering the amount of time we spend in teaching grammar.

It was observed that the CCCC model allowed students to go through several stages that included checking, rechecking, confirming, practicing and sometimes producing. One of the salient points of the model was that it encouraged the learner to keep trying with the help of other students and the teacher to fulfill the assigned tasks. Occasionally, the instructor tried to listen to their discussion from a distance as his main intention was to allow the natural flow of the activity to continue without any distraction. Students would always try to check their answers with the instructor whenever he walked closer to them. During the 'past simple tense' activities most students became excited as they progressed



toward a more productive activity. In fact, these activities assisted students in building their own confidence and making extra effort to accomplish the graded tasks.

During a number of observation sessions, it was realized that all students in the three sections were highly involved in the tasks especially during the recognition activities. Even during the more demanding tasks, the least proficient students managed to go through the whole process of the model and prepare something to share with their classmates at the end of that activity. The use of this model helped minimize the shortcomings of working in groups where usually the more capable student did most of the work. During the grammar activities in those three classes, all students took responsibility for their own learning. The critical point of this model was that the least proficient student could seek help from the stronger one while she was very much involved in the learning process. Eventually, the less proficient student was not only trying to find out the correct answers for her questions, but she was also trying to comprehend what she had found in order to be able to share that with other colleagues during the final stage of the activity. In fact, many students showed enthusiasm about the model and cooperative learning:

- A. When I work alone I can test my ability  
But my friends then help me when I work with them  
We work together and explain the meaning
- B. Yes, we explain the rule to each others  
Maybe we are right  
We feel confident when the teachers tell us our answer is right

Table 2: Number of times students talk about the grammar lesson with the teacher  
(Recurrent patterns of interaction)

	High language proficiency students		Average language proficiency students		Limited language proficiency students	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Before class	3	15.8	3	23.1	5	29.4
During class	10	52.6	6	46.2	4	23.5
During office hours	4	21.1	2	15.4	5	29.4
By appointment	2	10.5	2	15.4	3	17.6
Total	19	100.0	13	100.0	17	100.0

The cumulative data in both Table 2 and Table 3 summarize the answer to the third research question which dealt with the recurrent patterns of interaction. Both of these

tables included quantitative data about the number of times students talked about the grammar lessons and the number of times they interacted and communicated with the teacher. Table 2 shows the number of students who interacted with the teacher at different times. The students with high language proficiency were found to be more active in interacting with the teacher during class time (52.6%) while limited language proficiency students talked to the teacher mostly during his office hours time and before class (29.4%). The amount of participation of limited language proficiency students during class time (23.5%) was almost half of that (46.2%) of their colleagues in the intermediate category. The researcher realized that a few students were very shy and did not participate in reflecting on their own learning. In order to involve everybody in the discussion, the researcher decided later to have a small group conference led by a student who was more fluent. During this group work activity, it was realized that other students in each group encouraged the quieter students to contribute and say something even if it was very simple. At the end of this activity, a student from each group was invited to report her group's answers.

Table 3: Number of times students asked for clarification, expressed opinion and made comments (Recurrent patterns of interaction)

	High language proficiency students		Average language proficiency students		Limited language proficiency students	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Asking for clarification	3	15.8	7	53.8	10	58.8
Expressing opinions	12	63.2	4	30.8	6	35.3
Making comments	4	21.1	2	15.4	1	5.9
Total	19	100.0	13	100.0	17	100.0

Table 3 demonstrates the number of times each group of students participated in communication with the teacher. Along with Table 2, it summarizes the answer to question number three which dealt with recurrent patterns of interaction. When considering the elements in Table 3, the grammar model was found to encourage not only the strongest students to communicate with the teacher but also those students with limited language proficiency. During some classes, the number of times each student approached the teacher to seek help or get clarification for the tasks was counted. The limited language proficiency students were found to be more active in interacting with the teacher and other fellow students than those who were seen as articulate and forthcoming students. Table 3 shows that the majority of students (58.8) who asked for clarification were those students with limited language proficiency. In comparison with other students, the limited language proficiency students were found to be less involved

in making comments (5.9%). However, their share in expressing opinions (35.3%) was higher than that of those in the intermediate group (30.8%). All these results demonstrate the value of the new grammar model in providing all students with appropriate opportunities to interact and communicate with others at various times and for different purposes.

One anecdotal finding was that students became more interested when the textbook was not used every day as the basis for teaching and learning. The conference sessions with students gave the researcher a great insight about the students' preferences and the way they approached things when they were learning. In the following quote, a student highlighted her view:

I am interested when the textbook is not used  
I don't like the textbook  
With these activities there is no textbook or writing  
I feel bored in a writing class because we have to write  
I don't mean I don't like writing, but not everyday  
I mean I need to improve my English

This negative view about the textbook could be related to the nature of the exercises offered in the Academic Writing Course (AWC). Most of those exercises required students to deal with elements of writing. In contrast, the CCCC grammar model offered students various activities and allowed them to work in different ways. Another interpretation might be related to the difficulties that students were facing while participating in writing activities. The second point in the above quote is extremely informative as it highlighted the student's awareness of her needs and current language proficiency. A similar result was reported by Mazdayasna and Tahririan (2008) about Iranian students who indicated that they need to reach an appropriate level of English before they can do any work in their specialized academic areas. Like the Iranian students, the subjects of this study seemed to possess clear perceptions and awareness regarding their needs, current language proficiency levels and future careers. Finally, the collected data provides evidence about the nature of the grammar model in boosting students' motivation and willingness to make extra effort to do different tasks in the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

This study looked at the impact of a given grammar model on students' perceptions regarding grammar learning. It also investigated and uncovered the salient recurrent patterns of interaction. The 'CCCC' grammar model was found to assist in encouraging students to be more involved in the activities. The findings revealed that students were satisfied with the framework of the model and the process that they went through in learning grammar. A number of them became excited at the end of each activity and expressed their positive attitudes towards their participation and learning. Their positive attitude was reflected in their growing confidence, enthusiasm to express their opinion, and willingness to work cooperatively. Another crucial result highlighted the students'

beliefs regarding the positive influence of explicit grammar teaching on learning the conventions of sentences and utterances. This study can be replicated and be taken a step further. Future studies may look exhaustively at students' progress after being exposed to this model.

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