EFL Students' Beliefs about How They Learn Grammar Best

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Abstract

Learner beliefs about how they learn a language best play a vital role in the instructional process and the role of grammar instruction has been a much-debated topic in the research and practice of EFL instruction. This study explores learner beliefs about how they best learn grammar focusing on four construct pairs: meaning-focused versus form-focused instruction, focus on form versus focus on forms, explicit versus implicit instruction, and inductive versus deductive grammar instruction. Data were collected through a survey from 927 preparatory year and undergraduate students at an English-medium university in an English as a foreign language (EFL) setting. Results showed that regardless of year of study, students showed a preference for having grammar included as part of their lessons and course books, and although focus on form was reported to be the least preferred method of instruction, when given a choice between implicit versus explicit grammar instruction, all groups preferred explicit instruction.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, form-focused instruction, grammar teaching, learner beliefs

1. Introduction

Beliefs can be defined as evaluative propositions that individuals regard to be true and that have a strong affective component (Borg, 2001). Learner beliefs have been identified as important individual-level variables in language learning (Dornyei, 2005; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003) that both underlie and to a great extent guide learner behavior (Horwitz, 1988, 1999). Considering that beliefs are "highly individual, relatively stable, and relatively enduring" (Grotjahn, 1991:189), studying learner beliefs can help in exploring, understanding, and predicting learner behavior. Research shows that learner beliefs influence learner strategies, motivation, language proficiency (Mori, 1999; Yang, 1999; Tang & Tian, 2014), anxiety, and autonomous learning (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003). There is also evidence that unrealistic beliefs can impede language learning (Sawir, 2002).

In contexts where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), an overreliance on grammar instruction is often observed. One of the reasons for this emphasis on grammar instruction is the backwash effect of the assessment system. Especially in discrete item proficiency tests and in writing assessment, knowledge of grammar and grammatical accuracy play a significant role in overall performance of the student. Since learner beliefs about how they learn best plays a significant role in shaping their learning process, studying their beliefs about how they learn grammar is of importance in grammar instruction. Also, the recent trends in education show that online and blended learning environments in which learner needs and beliefs take a leading role are becoming more common. This study aims to explore university students' beliefs about how they believe they learn grammar with the aim of aligning the instructional process with these beliefs.

2. Review of Literature

The role of grammar instruction has been a much-debated topic in the research and practice of EFL instruction. One issue framing this debate has been focus of instruction, i.e. form-focused instruction (FFI) versus meaning-focused instruction (MFI). MFI considers second-language acquisition to be similar to first-language acquisition, with the instructional process required to reach the primary goal of language, namely the communication of meaning. According to MFI, the provision of comprehensible input and a low affective filter are the prerequisites of language learning, while explicit attention to linguistic forms is seen as unnecessary and corrective feedback as ineffective (e.g. Krashen, 1981, Terrel, 1977). Thus, proponents of MFI discourage explicit any grammar instruction or focus on discrete linguistic items, which are not seen as benefitting learner language development (Loewen, 2011). However, this reluctance exhibited towards grammar instruction conflicts with

evidence from EFL teachers, particularly those in second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) contexts, who "generally reported that attention to grammar was something they valued and promoted in their work" (Borg, 2015:137)

In contrast to meaning-focused instruction, form-focused instruction refers to "any planned activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form" (Ellis, 2001: p. 1). According to Ellis (2015), FFI may be divided into two basic categories: planned attempts to intervene in interlanguage development, thereby catering to intentional language learning, and attempts to attract learner attention to forms during the instructional process through instructional activities not explicitly designed to teach them, thereby catering to incidental acquisition. Long (1988; 1991) has labelled these two types of FFI as, respectively, 'focus on form (FonF)' and 'focus on forms (FonFs)'. FonFs refers to the teaching of grammar in a linearly designed structural syllabus where grammatical items are discretely defined and follow one another, and instruction is planned according to the presentation-practice-production (PPP) approach that provides learners with extensive exposure to the target structure (Long, 1988). FonF, on the other hand, refers to an instructional process in which the primary focus is on using language for meaningful interactions, with grammar coming into focus incidentally if and when the need arises. As stated by Long (1991: 45-46), "Focus on form … overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise." According to Ellis (2015), focus-on-form is transitory, observable (i.e. occurs intentionally), and incidental, arising during discourse that is primarily meaning-centered.

Insights into teacher and student beliefs about grammar instruction have been gleaned through two large-scale studies by Schulz (1996, 2001) that compared the beliefs about grammar teaching and corrective feedback of language teachers and learners. The first study was conducted with 92 language teachers and 824 language learners at an American university, whereas the second study was conducted with 122 language teachers and 607 learners in Colombia. The two studies were consistent in demonstrating that students and teachers had major differences in their beliefs about how grammar is learned. For example, while 80 per cent of the students in the US study believed that "the formal study of grammar is essential to the eventual mastery of the language," only 64 per cent of teachers shared this view. In the Colombian study, the differences in teacher and student opinions about foreign-language learning were even more distinct: for example, although 76 per cent of students said they liked grammar, only 30 per cent of teachers felt students did.

In their discussion of FFI, Spada and Lightbrown (2008) focus on isolated versus integrated FFI. In the isolated version, the focus on language form is separated from the communicative use of language, whereas with integrated FFI, learner attention is drawn to language form during communicative language use. According to a study by Valeo and Spada (2016) that explored differences between EFL instruction in Brazil and ESL instruction in Canada, teachers and learners in both contexts exhibited a distinct preference for integrated FFI, while also acknowledging the value of isolated FFI. These findings are in line with those of Spada and Lima (2015), who concluded that both EFL and ESL learners and teachers prefer integrated FFI over isolated FFI.

In addition to the discussions on MFI vs FFI and FonF vs FonFs, there are two other issues relating to grammar instruction that are subjects of debate, namely, implicit (ImpI) versus explicit instruction (ExpI), and inductive (II) versus deductive instruction (DI). DeKeyser (1995) has noted the close association between these two sets of issues, pointing out that whereas induction can be either implicit or explicit (and, further, explicit induction can occur with or without a teacher or textbook), deductive learning is necessarily explicit.

With ExpI, the teacher draws learner attention to specific grammatical patterns with the expectation that learners master them. ExpI may involve either a deductive approach, in which a grammar rule or explanation is initially provided and followed with multiple examples, or an inductive approach, in which learners are first presented with a sample of language (e.g. a text or a set of sentences) that contains the targeted grammatical item and are then directed to an activity that guides them in generating or discovering the rule on their own (Baştürkmen, 2018).

In contrast to ExpI, with ImpI, the teacher creates a context in which learners can learn experientially by communicating in the target language. In line with Ellis's (2002) definition of implicit learning as the acquisition of knowledge through a process that takes place naturally, simply, and without conscious operations, in implicit instruction, learners focus on meaning or message while inferring grammatical rules without conscious awareness.

In exploring learner beliefs about how they best learn grammar, this study focuses on four construct pairs:

1   Meaning-focused (MFI) versus form-focused (FFI) instruction;

2   Focus on form (FonF) versus focus on forms (FonFs);

3   Explicit (ExpI) versus implicit (ImpI) instruction;

4   Inductive (II) versus deductive (DI) grammar instruction.

These four construct pairs guide grammar instruction to a great extent. Roles of the learners, teachers and teaching materials are shaped by the approach adopted in grammar instruction. For example, in MFI, learners are not provided any grammar input and the primary focus of instruction is on meaning. In FonFs, however, dealing with language forms is the main aim of the English lesson. In inductive instruction, learners are encouraged to identify the grammar rules while in deductive instruction rules are highlighted and explained. Therefore, being aware of learners' preferences about grammar instruction can guide the syllabus and materials designer about the approach to be adopted and the roles to be assigned to teachers and learners. This study aims to provide the link between SLA research about grammar learning and learner preferences about grammar instruction.

Research Questions

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1   What beliefs on grammar instruction are held by preparatory year (Prep School) and undergraduate students in an EFL setting at an English-medium university?

2   To what extent are these beliefs related to language proficiency and year of study?

3. Materials and Method

The study was conducted at an urban English-medium public university in Ankara, Turkey. The university has a total of 26,500 students, 17,000 of whom are enrolled in undergraduate programs. In order to begin their freshman year, students who have been admitted to the university must demonstrate proof of English-language proficiency on either an international or in-house proficiency test given at the university. Students who score below the required threshold (TOEFL iBT: 75; IELTS: 6) must spend at least one academic year in the intensive language preparatory program at the university's Prep School, which enrolls approximately 3,500 students during the academic year.

Study participants were identified through stratified random sampling, with the number of participants completing the survey decreasing by year of study, in line with the decrease in the number of students enrolled in English courses. (Whereas the Prep School program consists entirely of English language courses, and two compulsory English courses are required of freshmen, most departments offer only English courses as electives for students in subsequent years.) Data were collected through a survey that was administered to students in paper-pencil format on optical forms during class hours, with undergraduate students completing the survey during their English classes. Completing the survey was voluntary and respondents could opt out if they preferred to. In an effort to minimize social desirability bias, respondents were asked to express their own views about how they prefer to learn grammar, not what their instructors would want them to say. Necessary approvals for administration of the survey were obtained from the University Ethics Committee. The survey was adapted from Graus and Coppen (2016) and included four sections:

Section 1: Demographic Information

Section 2: 6 items for each of 4 construct pairs: (MFI vs. FFI, FonF vs. FonFs, ImpI vs. ExpI, and II vs. DI); total 24 items

Section 3: 2 items on the relationship between language level and inductive/deductive preference

Section 4: 1 open-ended item asking about the factors (3 max.) shaping student beliefs about grammar and language learning

Descriptive statistics were used in analyzing data on student preferences for grammar-instruction approaches, and independent-samples t-tests were used to compare the differences between student groups based on their year of study.

4. Results and Discussion

In total, 927 students completed the survey. Of these, 684 (74%) were enrolled in the Prep School, 125 (13%) in their freshman year, 65 (7%) in their sophomore year, 39 (4%) in their junior year, and 14 (2%) in their senior year.
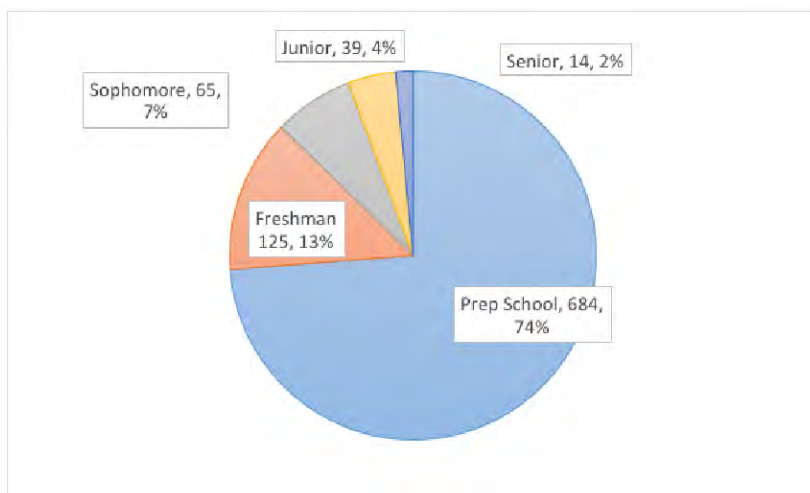
Figure 1. Distribution of Participants Across Years at University (N=927)

Of the 684 Prep School participants, 296 (45%) were at pre-intermediate, 245 (37%) at intermediate, and 115 (18%) at advanced levels.
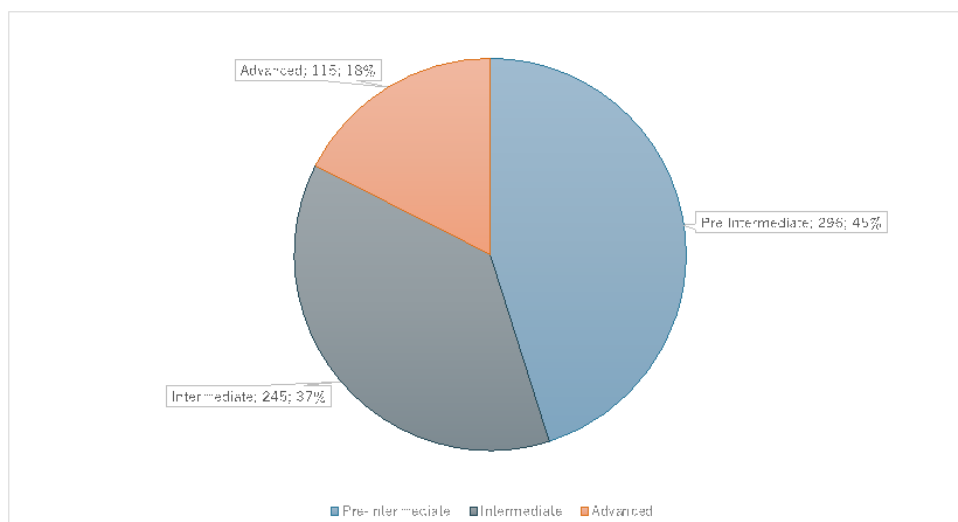

Figure 2. Distribution of Prep School Participants Across Language Levels (N = 684)

Table 1 presents a summary of the survey results regarding student preferences for instruction according to their year of study. As the table shows, implicit instruction was preferred by Prep School, freshman and sophomore students, whereas MFI was preferred by junior and senior students. FonF was the least preferred method of instruction, regardless of the year of study at university.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics according to year (N = 927)

Group	N	MFI-FFI		FonF- FonFs		II-EI		Inductive-Deductive		Total	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Prep School	684	3.46	.43	3.20	.43	3.57	.50	3.34	.44	3.39	.28
Freshman	125	3.34	.39	3.08	.40	3.56	.46	3.32	.42	3.33	.29
Sophomore	65	3.37	.42	3.16	.33	3.59	.55	3.38	.43	3.38	.28
Junior	39	3.49	.29	2.98	.32	3.37	.49	3.27	.32	3.28	.17
Senior	14	3.53	.40	3.10	.33	3.35	.45	3.24	.41	3.31	.30
Total	927	3.44	.42	3.17	.41	3.56	.50	3.34	.43	3.38	.28

Table 2 presents the findings for sample items investigating each of the paired constructs according to the participating students' year of study. Preferences within each of the four paired constructs were similar, regardless of instructional year.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics grouped according year (N = 927)

Item #	Prep School (n = 684)		Freshman (n = 125)		Sophomore (n = 65)		Junior (n = 39)		Senior (n = 14)		Total (n = 927)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Item 1	4.01	.96	3.72	1.00	3.92	.92	4.28	.69	4.29	.61	4.04	.84
Item 2	3.99	.98	3.70	1.03	3.97	.79	4.26	.85	4.07	.92	4.00	.91
Item 8	3.86	.92	3.66	.92	3.89	.69	3.69	.83	3.85	.77	3.79	.82
Item 9	2.90	1.03	2.90	1.02	2.89	1.12	2.46	.88	2.56	1.01	2.74	1.01
Item 13	4.10	.88	4.04	.88	4.09	.79	3.56	1.05	3.72	.61	3.90	.84
Item 16	3.41	1.13	3.46	1.07	3.43	1.19	3.46	.97	2.93	1.14	3.34	1.10
Item 19	3.98	.88	3.71	.94	4.00	.71	3.79	.73	3.71	.83	3.84	.82
Item 24	3.29	1.10	3.43	1.15	3.35	1.15	3.62	.99	3.21	1.05	3.38	1.09
Total	3.39	1.03	3.33	1.02	3.38	.98	3.28	.92	3.31	.95	3.34	.98

The results for Item 1 ("Grammar should be a part of English lessons" (MFI)) and Item 2 ("Grammar should be a part of English course books." (FFI)) show that all students showed a preference for having grammar as a part of their lessons and course books. This held true even for students in their junior and senior years, whose English courses do not feature an explicit grammar component.

The results for Item 8 ("Course books should systematically focus on grammatical features." (FonF)) and Item 9 ("Teachers should focus on grammar as an independent component of the lesson." (FonFs)) show that students prefer course books that systematically focus on grammatical features over teachers who focus on grammar as an independent component of the lesson.

The results for Item 13 ("When teaching grammar, teachers should explicitly state the grammatical rules." (ImpI)) and Item 16 ("The best way to learn grammar is to encounter many examples of the structure without seeing the rule." (ExpI)) show that students preferred explicit focus over implicit learning of grammar, and the results for Item 19 ("A teacher should teach English by explaining the grammar rules." (I)) and Item 24 ("It is better to discover grammatical rules as a student than to have them presented by the teacher." (D)) show that students preferred deductive grammar instruction over inductive grammar instruction.

An independent-samples t-test comparing Prep School students and undergraduate students (Table 3) found a statistically significant difference between the scores of Prep School students (M = 3.39, SD = .28) and those of other students (M = 3.33, SD = .27; t (925) = 2.89, p<.05, d = .22). According to Cohen (1988), these results suggest that year in university has a significant effect on the overall beliefs of students as to how they best learn grammar.

Table 3. Group differences for the beliefs of Prep School students and other students (N = 927)

	Preparatory (n = 684)		Other (n = 243)				
Measure	M	SD	M	SD	t (925)	p	Cohen's d
Beliefs	3.39	.28	3.33	.27	2.89	.004	.22

Results of an independent-samples t-test (Table 4) found Prep School students had significantly higher scores favoring MFI (M = 3.46, SD = .43) when compared to other students (M = 3.39, SD = .39; t (925) = 2.32, p < .05, d = .17).

Table 4. Group differences for the MFI-FFI construct pair for Prep School students and other students (N = 927)

	Preparatory (n = 684)		Other (n = 243)				
Measure	M	SD	M	SD	t (925)	p	Cohen's d
MFI-FFI	3.46	.43	3.39	.39	2.32	.021	.17

Similarly, results of an independent-samples t-test (Table 5) found Prep School students had significantly higher scores favoring FonF over FonFs (M = 3.20, SD = .43) when compared to other students (M = 3.09, SD = .37; t (486.81) = 3.94, p<.05, d = .27). According to Cohen (1988), these results indicate that the year in university has a small but significant effect on student preferences for MFI versus FFI and for FonF versus FonFs.

Table 5. Group differences for the FonF-FonFs construct pair for Prep School and other students (N =927)

	Prep School (n = 684)		Other (n = 243)				
Measure	M	SD	M	SD	t (486.81)	p	Cohen's d
FonF-FonFs	3.20	.43	3.09	.37	3.94	.000	.27

As Tables 6 and 7 show, independent-samples t-tests found no statistically significant differences between the beliefs of Prep School students and other students regarding implicit versus explicit instruction (M = 3.57, SD = .50; M = 3.52, SD = .49; t (925) = 1.17, p >.05). Or regarding inductive versus deductive instruction (M = 3.57, SD = .50; M = 3.52, SD = .49; t (925) = 1.17, p>.05).

Table 6. Group differences for the ImpI-ExpI construct pair for Prep School students and others (N = 927)

	Prep School (n = 684)		Other (n = 243)			
Measure	M	SD	M	SD	t (925)	p
II-EI	3.57	.50	3.52	.49	1.17	.244

Table 7. Group differences for the II-DI construct pair scores for Prep School and other students (N = 927)

	Prep School (n = 684)		Other (n = 243)			
Measure	M	SD	M	SD	t (453.45)	p
Inductive-Deductive	3.34	.44	3.33	.41	.40	.690

In Section 3 of the survey, students were asked their beliefs about the effectiveness of inductive and deductive grammar instruction for learning simple and complex grammatical structures. The survey found that the majority of students (64%) believed inductive instruction to be more effective for teaching simple grammatical structures than for teaching difficult grammatical structures. Conversely, the majority of students (59%) believed inductive instruction to be more effective for teaching difficult grammatical structures than for teaching simple grammatical structures.

In the final section of the survey (Section 4) in which students were asked about the factors that shaped their beliefs, the most influential factor, mentioned by 72 per cent of respondents, was their use of English outside the classroom. This was followed by high-school English teachers (55%) and classmates (40%).

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study indicated that Prep School, freshman and sophomore students considered implicit grammar instruction to be their preferred method of language instruction, whereas junior and senior undergraduate students preferred meaning-focused instruction. This finding shows that students can change their beliefs as they progress through their undergraduate education. However, focus on form remained the least preferred method of participating students of all years.

Interestingly, although focus on form (FonF) was reported to be the least preferred method of instruction, when given a choice between implicit (II) versus explicit (EI) grammar instruction, all groups preferred explicit instruction. Thus, it is possible to conclude that while students dislike FonF as an instructional method, they benefit from explicit grammar instruction.

Regardless of year, students showed a preference for having grammar included as part of their lessons and course books. Even juniors and seniors, whose English courses do not feature any explicit grammar component, expressed a preference for such a focus. Students also indicated a preference for course books that focus systematically on grammatical features rather than having teachers focus on grammar as an independent component of the lesson.

In terms of the construct pairs of implicit versus explicit and inductive versus deductive instruction, all groups of students preferred explicit over implicit grammar learning and deductive versus inductive grammar learning. However, whereas Prep School students prefer meaning-focused instruction over form-focused instruction and focus on form over focus on forms, students in the departments prefer form-focused instruction and focus on forms. The significant difference found between the beliefs of Prep School students and those of freshmen through seniors in undergraduate departments also shows that learner views about grammar instruction changes when they use English as a medium of instruction and may be due to the fact that departmental English courses, in contrast to Prep School courses, have skills-based curricula that do not explicitly focus on form.

As a follow-up to this study, a qualitative study may be conducted to examine in further detail the factors that change student beliefs. In addition, given the many subjects on which the literature registers differences between student and teacher beliefs, a study looking into similarities and differences in student and teacher beliefs about grammar instruction is warranted. Studies of this nature could yield informative results that could help guide instructional practices.

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