



Metalinguistic reflective beliefs of Saudi EFL teachers in the content of grammar teaching and learning: A cross-sectional survey

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Abstract

Teachers' beliefs have been shown to have a significant impact on educational practice, particularly in the domain of grammar instruction, where teachers have strong opinions. Traditional grammar training is sometimes criticized for promoting lower order thinking and relying on rules of thumb rather than new language developments. A rising corpus of research on grammar instruction proposes that linguistics, conceptual knowledge, and introspective or higher-order thinking should be prioritized in grammar training. Generally, this present study explored the metalinguistic reflective beliefs and teachers' beliefs on grammar content knowledge. It hoped to address the gap on this problem of inquiry. This study employed a cross-sectional survey research design for 266 EFL Saudi teachers. A questionnaire was used as an instrument for data gathering in this study. Results showed that Saudi EFL teachers have a positive view of their metalinguistic reflective beliefs. They also have positive beliefs on grammar content knowledge. It also surfaced that there is a positive relationship between the two variables (metalinguistic reflectivity and grammar content knowledge), implying that when teachers have a high level of metalinguistic reflectivity beliefs, they highly manifest acceptable beliefs in teaching grammar content. Implications of this study will strengthen the language teaching skills of teachers to strengthen the grammar curriculum of the Saudi context.

Keywords: cross-sectional survey; grammar teaching and learning; metalinguistic reflective beliefs; Saudi EFL

1. Introduction

Grammar instruction has long been a cornerstone of students' first language education, dating at least as far back as ancient antiquity (Jindal & Farley, 2020; Lin et al., 2020; Yu & Lin, 2020). Since the 1970s, grammar education has been a hot topic due to societal changes and the advent of new linguistic fields like pragmatics and sociolinguistics. These international developments resulted in the emergence of a new paradigm in language education, dubbed the communicative paradigm (Jindal & Farley, 2021), in which educational emphasis shifted away from grammar and literature instruction and toward the teaching of communication skills, at least ideologically. This has resulted in

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considerable revisions to various nations' educational curriculum in recent years. Grammar was frequently degraded from a significant position in the curriculum to a minor one, and in some cases, grammar was totally eliminated. Grammar is making a (forceful) comeback in areas where the latter took place. Such patterns may be observed in a number of nations where grammar teaching has returned as a state priority, most notably in Saudi Arabia (Al-Ahdal & Al-Ahdal, 2019; Alkhodimi & Al-Ahdal, 2019; Al-Qunayeer et al., 2020).

Classical grammar teaching has not disappeared from educational practice in other educational jurisdictions, such as the Netherlands (Aslam et al., 2019, Sadeghi & Pourhaji, 2021). In recent years, the central topic in the still-active debates on grammar appears to have evolved from "why teach grammar at all?" to "How grammar should be taught?" Such research takes an empirical approach to these problems, focusing in particular on associated teachers' attitudes and textbooks, which are known to have a significant impact on classroom practices (Thararuedee & Wette, 2020).

2. What Kind of Grammar Should Students be Taught?

There has been much debate on which grammar should be taught (Tseng & Zhang, 2020). A number of scholars have sought to answer this question in order to re-establish the connection between grammar education and linguistic theory. They proposed that current linguistic theory's conceptual knowledge may be leveraged to build a common, theoretically sound metalanguage for grammar instruction, providing both instructors and students with more effective ways to impart grammatical information. Several of these scholars argued that discovering critical conceptual material from theoretical linguistics is crucial for pedagogically strengthening grammar instruction, both for writing education (Anglada & Banegas) and for general language awareness (Kyeong-ok & Jeong-won, 2020). Theoretical linguists generally agree on key concepts from modern language theory that are pertinent to grammar education. Experts reached a consensus about the significance of 24 ideas in the syntax-semantics relationship (Mohammadi & Yousefi, 2019). According to Mansouri et al., (2019), using these concepts as a foundation for grammar teaching techniques will undoubtedly increase grammatical awareness and comprehension, giving rise to the concept of 'conscious grammar skills' (Kawinkoonlasate, 2019). Grammar education that emphasizes conscious grammar skills aims to improve students' grammatical comprehension in the classroom through the use of linguistic (grammatical) ideas. However, a divide persists between conceptual knowledge derived from contemporary language theory and old grammatical nomenclature. That is, it is unclear which classical grammar terminology can be used to teach particular linguistic ideas and how this can be accomplished.

3. Literature Review

3.1. *What is the most efficient way to teach grammar?*

In response to question (b), 'How should grammar be taught?' a broad preference for contextualized grammar training appears to exist. This corresponds to the communicative paradigm and instrumental view of language. In Australia and New Zealand, for example, this method of teaching grammar is still employed (Fuchs et al., 2019; Sato & Oyandele, 2019; Badash et al., 2020). This preference for communicative goals appears to correspond to research on the link between grammar education and literacy development. Regardless of whether teachers employ a contextualized approach to grammar teaching, the topic of "how instructors might allow for increasing levels of metalinguistic comprehension" remains unresolved. This appears to be the most effective method for achieving this goal: reflecting on language learning experiences.

A reflective mind-set, which can also be viewed as a continuous source of grammar learning, is required for reflective thinking (Loan, 2019). Reflection in thinking was identified as a critical component of learning by Vygotsky and Dewey, as well as many of their followers. Reflective thinking is described as a process of meaning formation in which a learner progresses from one experience to the next with a deeper knowledge of how it relates to and interacts with other ideas and experiences (Almuhamadi, 2020). Although teachers' opinions are a primary focus of educational research for both current and preservice teachers (Vuong et al., 2019), little is known regarding their impact on Saudi EFL grammar instruction. In most of the educational literature on grammar instruction, two parts of teachers' ideas are emphasized: conceptual knowledge (derived from or connected to current linguistic theory) and reflective thinking. Teachers' beliefs is defined by Avarzamani and Farahian, (2019) as 'what teachers know, believe, and think.

Previous studies on metalinguistic knowledge among instructors is dominant (Afshar & Farahani, 2015; Qing, 2009; Ashraf & Zolfaghari, 2018). In addition, teachers have a propensity to overestimate their linguistic competence, supporting the perception that their linguistic knowledge is outmoded. As evidenced by instructors' responses to questions assessing their understanding of prediction and valency, this does not appear to be a case of their not knowing the correct terminology. If instructors were unfamiliar with the correct phrase but grasped the concept, they would have scored far higher on the associated assertions. As a result, before instructors can increase their conceptual grasp of grammar, they must be introduced to critical ideas at the syntax-semantics interface in order to (better) communicate this information to their pupils. As Kheirzadeh and Sistani (2018) revealed, a lack of conceptual understanding results in grammatical mistakes and poor pedagogical choices when it comes to passive construction teaching. Fortunately, Donyaie and Afshar (2019) showed that undergraduate students' metalinguistic comprehension might be enhanced quickly. Short training sessions appear to be a good strategy to improve instructors' language skills. Finally, educational linguists can help further study the relationship between linguistic concepts and conventional grammatical words.

4. Research Purpose

Outside of the Saudi context, this issue is particularly intriguing since, to the researchers' knowledge, this is the first study to examine these specific characteristics of instructors' views about grammar instruction. It specifically aims to:

1. Ascertain EFL teachers' metalinguistic reflective beliefs;
2. Assess EFL teachers' beliefs on grammar content knowledge;
3. Ascertain the relationship between metalinguistic reflective beliefs and grammar content knowledge of EFL teachers.

5. Method

5.1. Research Design

A cross-sectional survey design was employed in this study. Data were collected to derive conclusions about a target population (universe) at a certain point in time. Cross-sectional surveys are thought of as snapshots of the populations for whom they gather data. Respondents to a survey at one point in time are not purposefully recruited again in a repeated cross-sectional survey, albeit a responder to one administration of the survey may be randomly picked for a subsequent one. Cross-sectional surveys vary from panel surveys in this sense because individual respondents are monitored throughout time. Typically, panel surveys are used to track changes in the population being studied.

6. Participants

This research enrolled a total of 266 Saudi EFL teachers. The sample includes both male and female with different teaching experiences. They taught English at different Saudi secondary schools. The teacher respondents were included based on their experience as an English language teacher, which ranged from zero to twenty years. Rao soft was used to calculate the sampling representation of the respondents. As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, the majority of the respondents are female language teachers; the majority have 16 - 20 years of service.

Table 1. Sampling characteristics

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	99	37%
Female	167	63%
Years of Service		
0-5 years	56	21%
6-10 years	70	26%
11-15 years	45	17%
16-20 years	62	23%
21 years and more	33	12%

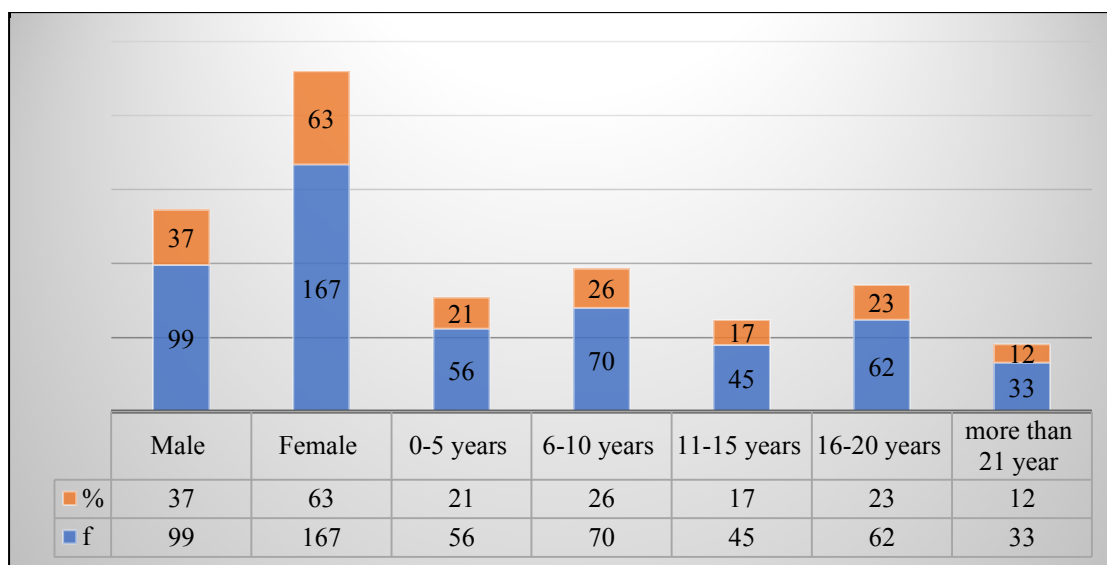


Figure 1. Sampling characteristics

7. Instrumentation

The most effective method of assessing beliefs is through the use of a questionnaire. Furthermore, previous research on epistemic beliefs has shown that when interviews are used, social desirability issues arise. In order to measure beliefs about perceived grammatical understanding, questionnaires are routinely utilized (Sandiford & Macken-Horaril, 2020). Qualtrics was utilized to give an online questionnaire to 110 in-service secondary school English Language and Literature teachers in order to elicit their perspectives on conceptual knowledge and reflective thinking in grammar instruction. The questionnaire was sent to Saudi language instructors via e-mail and made available for two weeks on a

Facebook page for Saudi EFL instructors. Teachers can participate in the survey anonymously and receive a language book as a prize. Validation of the questionnaire was conducted on preservice teachers from two separate institutes of applied sciences, resulting in some adjustments to the question or item format.

Three elements were included in the survey: (1) reflective thinking in the context of grammar instruction, (2) teachers' attitudes about conceptual knowledge, and (3) instructors' satisfaction with the textbook they were using. All items inside each sector were randomly assigned. Participants rated topics on a five-point Likert scale (from completely disagree to completely agree) in the first of these parts, which was mainly based on validated items used in history classrooms to assess reflective thinking. The questions were developed to measure pre-reflective (Cronbach's coefficient =.78), quasi-reflective (Cronbach's coefficient =.78), and reflective thinking (Cronbach's coefficient =.67) in a grammar classroom, with some negative loadings to represent reflective thinking. On average, the scale had a high degree of internal validity (mean Cronbach's coefficient =.89). Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to determine if participants scored similarly on both scales, as we examined three categories with two extremes.

8. Data Analysis

According to Pearson's r , the pre- and post-reflective measures exhibited a significant negative correlation ($r = -2.14$, $p = .025$, two-tailed), suggesting that the scales were replied differently. The second portion assessed instructors' familiarity with grammatical ideas using a five-point Likert scale. Internal validity of this scale was high (Cronbach's alpha =.94). Additionally, this component sought to ascertain instructors' familiarity with two major ideas from modern grammar education literature, namely predication and valency. To determine whether instructors may refer to both concepts implicitly or explicitly, we asked teachers to respond to statements indicative of referring to either idea. The third section of the questionnaire, which also had a high degree of internal validity (Cronbach's =.89), was designed to ascertain how satisfied instructors were with the textbook they used for grammar instruction. Using a grounded theory method comprised of one cycle, we classified these open issues. If an answer happened three times or more, we formed a category.

9. Results and Discussion

9.1. Metalinguistic reflectivity beliefs of teachers on grammar teaching

The reflective judgment paradigm should be seen as a continuum with three anchor points in order to get understanding into instructors' claimed practices. It was defined as the region between the pre- and quasi-reflective anchor points. Likewise, the space between the quasi-reflective and reflective anchor points was referred to as the quasi-reflective stage. The result in Table 2 showed that the respondents have an acceptable level of metalinguistic reflectivity on the three domains.

Table 2. Metalinguistic reflectivity beliefs of teachers on grammar teaching

Level of Metalinguistic Reflectivity	M	SD	Interpretation
Reflective	3.22	.56	Acceptable
Quasi-reflective	3.23	.89	Acceptable
Pre-reflective	3.06	.67	Acceptable
Categorical Mean	3.17		Acceptable

Legend: 3.51-4.00: Very Acceptable (VA); 2.51-3.50: Acceptable (A); 1.51-2.50: Moderately Acceptable (MA); 1.00-1.50: Not Acceptable (NA).

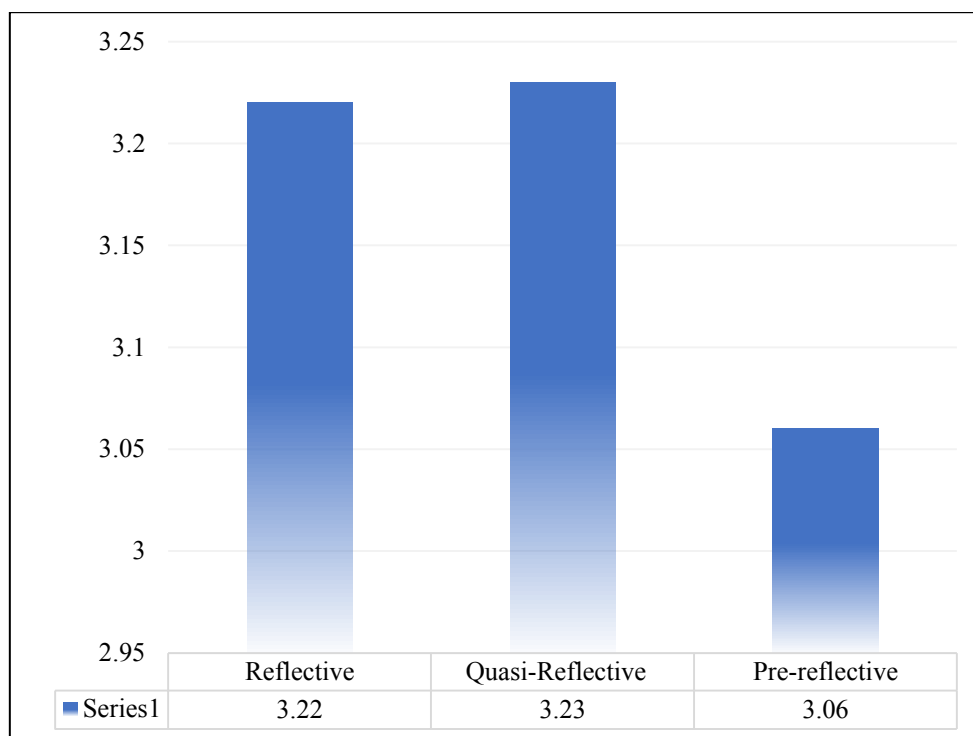


Figure 2. Metalinguistic reflectivity beliefs of teachers on grammar teaching

9.2. Teachers' beliefs on grammar content knowledge

Table 3 shows the level of teachers' beliefs in content knowledge in grammar teaching. Results showed that teachers have very acceptable beliefs on teaching subject-verb agreement, word order, and word structure. In like manner, they manifest acceptable beliefs on idiomatic connections, modality, tenses, and syntactical functions.

Table 3. Teachers' beliefs on content knowledge

	M	SD	Interpretation
Subject-Verb Agreement	3.56	0.45	Very Acceptable
Word order	4.00	0.34	Very Acceptable
Word structure	3.58	0.76	Very Acceptable
Idiomatic connections	3.45	0.34	Acceptable
Modality	3.28	0.45	Acceptable
Tenses	3.43	0.54	Acceptable
Syntactical functions	3.45	0.54	Acceptable
Categorical Mean	3.54		Very Acceptable

Legend: 3.51-4.00: Very Acceptable (VA); 2.51-3.50: Acceptable (A); 1.51-2.50: Moderately Acceptable (MA); 1.00-1.50: Not Acceptable (NA).

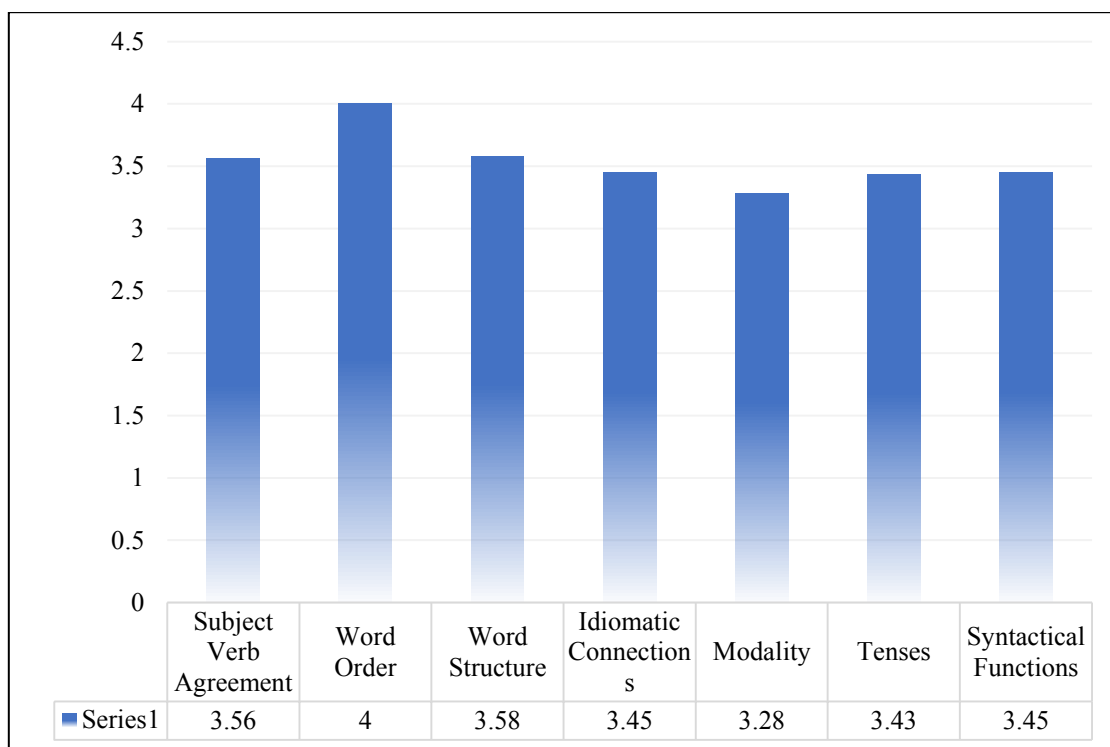


Figure 3. Teachers' beliefs on content knowledge

9.3. Test of relationship between teachers' metalinguistic reflective beliefs on grammar teaching and beliefs in content knowledge

Table 4. Metalinguistic reflectivity beliefs of teachers and beliefs on content knowledge

Metalinguistic Reflectivity Beliefs	
Grammar teaching and beliefs in content knowledge	r value 0.780
	p-value 0.002 *

Ns= not significant

**= significant at 0.05 level 2-tailed*

***= significant at 0.01 level 2 tailed*

Table 4 shows a test of the relationship between the teachers' metalinguistic reflective beliefs on grammar teaching and beliefs on content knowledge were calculated. The variables showed a significant relationship between metalinguistic reflectivity beliefs of teachers on grammar teaching and beliefs in content knowledge, $P= 0.002$. This shows that when teachers have a high level of metalinguistic reflective beliefs, they highly manifest acceptable beliefs in teaching grammar content. This means that the higher the reflective skills of the language teachers, the higher they value the content of grammar teaching.

10. Discussion

The majority of Saudi teachers tend to have quasi-reflective or reflective attitudes about grammar teaching, according to King and Kitchener's (2005) reflective judgement theory. Pre-reflective educators make up a limited fraction of all instructors. It is estimated that a fourth of the participating teachers are quasi-reflective thinkers, despite the fact that they could not be allocated to a single group.

After all, teachers who employ quasi-reflective reasoning acknowledge that knowledge is inherently ambiguous. Thus, they consider a range of viewpoints before reaching a well-informed decision in the current situation. This might help to explain why certain academics are difficult to classify.

Apart from the generally positive attitude towards facilitating reflective judgment in grammar lessons, there are signs that many teachers are willing to incorporate conceptual knowledge from modern linguistic theory: textbooks. Although often criticized for oversimplifying grammar and expecting too much from students, a small group of teachers from our dataset believed that textbooks had too much grammar. According to Us Saqlain et al., (2020) even instructors' arguments that grammar is too tough for their students are likely to be overcome through conceptual enrichment. After all, as some writers argue, grammar is overly complicated since no actual discoveries are sought, but rather grammatical analysis is controlled by gimmicks and rules-of-thumb (Dwyer et al., 2015; Kitchener, 1994; Perkowska-Klejman & Odrowąż-Coates, 2021). As a result, parsing phrases becomes pointless. The use of conceptual enrichment may aid in reducing the number of rules-of-thumb that add unnecessary complexity. Hassan et al., (2020) Teachers' self-reported knowledge of important concepts from contemporary linguistics, on the other hand, is not encouraging: they claim to understand only a few basic language concepts, such as agreement, word order, case, and syntactic functions. They are all included in standard grammar and have little bearing on contemporary linguistic theory. Additionally, teachers assert a solid understanding of semantic roles (e.g., agent, patient), the group's sole language notion.

This present study also showed that when teachers have a high level of metalinguistic reflective beliefs, they highly manifest acceptable beliefs in teaching grammar content. This means that the higher the reflective skill of the language teachers, the higher they value the content of grammar teaching. Such finding justifies that teachers' ability to reflect influences their beliefs on the content of teaching students the content of grammar. Reflective thinking, as a prominent word in teacher's education, is a way of thinking that is utilized in conjunction with other modern education techniques such as metacognition, critical thinking, analytical thinking, and creative thinking during the educational process (Babaei & Abednia, 2016; Nodoushan, 2010; Qiang, 2003). Reflective thinking differs from all other forms of thinking in that it offers a solution for interpreting, deferring, translating, arrogating to the person, grasping concerns discussed in school, and generating predictions for the future.

The link between instructors' perspectives and classroom practice on the one hand, and the rationale for include knowledge from the relevant academic subject on the other, is critical for successful curriculum development. According to Khodabandeh (2017), linguistics was excluded from the official Saudi curriculum due to teachers' and policymakers' perceptions of the relationship between the school subject Saudi Language and Literature and the linked academic discipline. Al Bataineh et al., (2019) emphasized the importance of collaboration (as opposed to transmission or non-cooperation) between school themes and academics, with teachers and academic linguists collaborating to provide the best possible grammar pedagogy. This is also a method to avoid the typical "grammar dispute" by concentrating on how rather than whether grammar should be taught at all. The professional learning community is an outstanding example of such collaboration since it brought together teachers and scientists to create teaching materials for grammar instruction.

11. Conclusion

Generally, this present study explored the metalinguistic reflective beliefs and teachers' beliefs on grammar content knowledge. It hopes to address the gap on this problem of inquiry. Results showed that Saudi EFL teachers have a positive view of their metalinguistic reflective beliefs and teachers'

beliefs on grammar content knowledge. It also surfaced that there is a positive relationship between the two variables. This means that the higher the reflective skill of the language teachers, the higher they value the content of grammar teaching. Implications of this study will strengthen the language teaching skills of teachers to strengthen the grammar curriculum of the Saudi context.

12. Implications and Limitations

Teachers and politicians are debating whether explicit grammar instruction should be included in L1 education once again, since grammar has returned in language policy and academic study worldwide over the previous decade (Van Rijt et al., 2019; Cochrane Bond et al., 2020). Numerous articles on the issue emphasize the additional benefit of adding ideas from modern linguistic theory (Monbec, 2020) and fostering a reflective attitude that enables pupils to develop a more conscious level of language comprehension and use. This is the first study to look at Saudi grammar instructors' thoughts on contemporary linguistic theories and reflective thinking. It is critical to remember that the goal of this research was to shed light on ideas, not on current teaching practices. As a result, while the current study provides useful information concerns the proclaimed practice, it falls short of providing a comprehensive picture of secondary school life. While the majority of teachers assert that they include linguistic materials into their grammar courses, it is difficult to verify this. As a result, a critical next step is to get a deeper grasp of real-world classroom activities in terms of conceptual knowledge and reflective thinking. It is tough to assess people's views. Although surveys are a typical way to learn about teachers' perspectives, they contain a few flaws that may have influenced the results. Because all teachers were invited to participate in our survey, it is probable that the majority of those who replied had strong opinions regarding grammar education. As a result, the survey may have targeted instructors with viewpoints that differ from those of their colleagues (for example, those who are more thoughtful).

In the context of this study, implications will serve for language training and enhancement of teachers. It will provide a better picture for the Saudi EFL curriculum to address the goal of quality language learning towards global competence. In like manner, this study has limitations on methodology since it only included variables of sex and years of service. Further studies need to be executed to validate the result of this study.

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