

The Roles of Grammar in English Language Teaching: Local Viewpoints

Saksit Saengboon¹,

Kosin Panyaatisin²,

School of Language and Communication,

National Institute of Development Administration^{1, 2}

Anuchit Toomaneejinda^{3*}

Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University³

Corresponding Author: anuchit.t@arts.tu.ac.th

Abstract

The roles of grammar in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) have long been discussed. This study explored viewpoints of five categories of local stakeholders regarding the roles of grammar in the Thai EFL context. Questionnaires were administered to two groups of Thai university students, and focus-group and semi-structured interviews were conducted with three other groups of both English lecturers and students, all of whom were in the academic context. This five-pronged method of data collection was intended to triangulate data sources. The study found that, contrary to popular belief, the majority of the participants agreed that grammar played a key role in the Thai EFL setting, especially the academic context. Most of the participants held positive views toward grammar instruction. Once grammar was taught with clear objectives, namely to take the TOEFL test or to understand academic English reading, the participants found it useful. However,

caution must be made in discussing the concept of grammar. On the one hand, grammar is often misconstrued as a hindrance to communication effectiveness; on the other hand, contextualized grammar with clear instructional objectives plays a pivotal role in developing English proficiency.

Keywords: Grammar, English as a foreign language (EFL), English language teaching (ELT)

Introduction

On March 9, 2016 Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha, in an interview broadcast nationwide, made a piercing remark concerning English language instruction in Thailand. He said, "...most [Thai] schools focus on teaching English grammar, with the learning largely bookish and repetitive, leaving students unprepared when having to communicate in more practical situations" (Mala & Jikkham, 2016, p. 2).

Also reported in the Bangkok Post of March 9, 2016 is another attack on grammar instruction by a local teacher who pointed out that "English teaching in Thailand at present only focuses on teaching grammar and vocabulary which students have to use in exams, so pupils care only about grades and cannot use English in real-life situations" (Mala & Jikkham, 2016, p. 3).

Based on the foregoing, English language instruction in the EFL context necessitates the rethinking of grammar instruction. While certain academicians believe that grammar should be emphasized because, without it, EFL learners will end up with fluent but not accurate English (Jean & Simard, 2011; Liamkina & Ryshina-Pankova, 2012; Loewen et al., 2009; Robinson, 2010; Shintani et al., 2013; Simard & Jean, 2011; Swain, 1985; Tolentino & Tokowicz, 2014), laypersons and the general public appear to be against English grammar instruction. They believe that explicit grammar instruction hinders proper communication. Clearly, confusion about the role of grammar instruction in the Thai EFL context is palpable as is

evidenced in the Prime Minister Prayut's remark mentioned. This is because laypersons and experts tend to have different understandings and interpretations of the very term "grammar." For laypersons, grammar implies boring language exercises involving useless grammar points. However, second language acquisition experts have almost always realized that grammar is a *sine qua non* and that grammar oftentimes reflects how educated people go about using English. This paper argues that it is this confusion that deserves a consideration regarding dichotomous thinking about the role of grammar in the Thai EFL setting.

This study was conducted to shed light on the dichotomous thinking about the roles of grammar in the teaching of English as a foreign language. The very word "grammar" has been placed in two extreme positions: one is a non-interface position, meaning grammar has no role at all in English proficiency development. That is, according to Krashen (1981 as cited in Barrot, 2020), "[i]n the non-interface position, explicit knowledge is completely distinct from and cannot be converted into implicit knowledge," (p. 618). This means that explicit grammar is unnecessary for acquisition. The other position is an interface position whereby grammar definitely has a place in second language development. In sum, there is a distinct need to heed viewpoints of stakeholders.

In the next section, English language instruction (ELT) in Thailand will be discussed to provide the context of the study. Also discussed will be the notion of second language (L2). This is followed by a discussion of types of grammar, and salient viewpoints of the research participants.

Literature Review

English Language Instruction in the Thai EFL Context

Since it was introduced to the general public through the formal schooling system in 1921 (Baker, 2008), the English language has played a key role in such major domains as education, diplomacy, business administration, public administration, to name a few. However, due to its status as a foreign language (EFL), English in Thai

society has not been extensively used among Thais from all walks of life. Additionally, when communicative language teaching (CLT) was introduced to the Thai classroom approximately 40 years ago, some teachers were misled into believing that they were not supposed to teach grammar. This misconception seems to have been responsible for the neglect of grammar instruction in the classroom. According to Sugiharto (2019), CLT should be construed as "...a situated practice relative to each context of use" (p. 1), implying that whether or not grammar should be taught depends on objectives of the lesson. Worse yet, the word "communicative" in CLT, according to Kumaravadivelu (2016), has been misconstrued by practitioners that "... by using this method they will be able to help learners develop much-needed communicative abilities. That is how the method was introduced" (p. 73). Equally important, it has been argued that a number of Thais have felt more at ease now than previously in using English owing to the emergence of Global Englishes (GE) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). That is, both GE and ELF have been said to empower Thais to use English without feeling overly concerned about native-like proficiency (Galloway & Numajiri, 2020). Given these lines of reasoning, grammar instruction appears to have taken a back seat, if not dispensed with.

Arguably, it is reasonable to assert that the misconception of the role of grammar in CLT-based lessons and the advent of GE and ELF have contributed to a lesser role of grammar in the use of English. In fact, the dismal use of English across various groups of Thais has resulted in relatively limited English proficiency as illustrated through scores on standardized tests, e.g., TOEFL, IELTS, and TOEIC. Therefore, attempts have been made through research to ameliorate the situation. The research run the gamut from vocabulary acquisition/learning (Supasiraprapa, 2019), English education reform (Hiranburana, 2020), assessment in Thai ELT (Todd et al., 2021), motivation and attitudes toward English language learning (Imsa-ard, 2020), comprehensibility of Thai English (Phuengpitipornchai & Teo, 2021) to qualifications of English teachers (Opasrattanakorn & Soontornwipast, 2021). These studies suggest that much remains to be

done as far as English instruction in Thailand is concerned and that the scope of research inquiry encompasses a broad spectrum.

Notwithstanding the extensive research areas as mentioned above, coupled with the low English proficiency among a number of Thais, the role of grammar is still relevant and in need of research. After all, effective communication requires not only fluency but also accuracy.

As regards reasons for relatively low English proficiency among EFL students, Williams (1998) argued that even the most dedicated EFL learners normally spend around 1,800 hours learning English in the classroom confines, whereas a native-English speaking child, by the age of 4, spends four times as many hours. Theoretically speaking, EFL learners should not be expected to succeed in using English given the scarcity of good quality English as input and a lack of daily use. However, from a practical point of view, the lackluster performance in English of most Thai learners is a cause for concern because Thailand has officially joined the AEC community, implying that the Thai workforce need a functional command of English in order to fully participate in the changing workforce landscape through the advent of the AEC community. More specifically, compared to other Asian countries, Thailand's position regarding the English language is precarious because English has never been used widely among Thais, whereas some countries such as Singapore and the Philippines have English as one of the first official languages. This certainly puts the Thai labor force at a disadvantage, professionally speaking.

Furthermore, as Nunan (2003) has put it, macro-level factors are more pertinent and responsible for a widespread lack of English proficiency among Thais. As a consequence, it might be useless to dwell on this mundane issue of whether or not to teach grammar. For English education in Thailand to make great strides in the foreseeable future, authorities concerned would need to look beyond the classroom, taking into account the importance of teacher education, foreign language policy, and high-stakes English examinations, to name but a few. Then and only then should smaller-scale issues such as to teach or not to teach grammar be scrutinized. This is because the major framework

around which the debate about the role of grammar has been put in place.

Given this enduring problem of low proficiency in English, it is argued that the major culprit has been grammar. That is, like Prime Minister Prayut, many Thais—those who are in authorities and those who are laypersons—put the blame on grammar instruction. They have lamented an overemphasis on grammar rules at the expense of communicative functions of learning a foreign language. This criticism has resurfaced many times over, although it has been asserted that the major approach to teaching English in the Thai EFL context, over the past three decades, is communicative language teaching. According to Nunan (1989), communicative language teaching¹ prioritizes language use rather than language rules. That is, form or grammar serves as an auxiliary. Still, the English language teaching scenario has been that most Thai EFL classrooms may not practice what they have been preached: that form, function and meaning of language should be properly intertwined. Rather, many Thai EFL classrooms have been observed in which the teachers have used the traditional way of teaching, which is grammar translation. This is one of the reasons why grammar is to blame for the lack of proficiency among Thais.

The Notion of Second Language (L2)

A second language could be understood from many points of view, but from a language pedagogy perspective, a second language (L2) refers to “any language not learned as a native speaker, i.e., after roughly the age of 12. Second is used at times to imply third or fourth. L2 is generally used on a daily basis in society” (Brown et al., 2014, p. 342). Additionally, like in SLA, L2 may not be acquired or learned

¹ Communicative language teaching (CLT) is an approach to language teaching that focuses on the L2 learner’s ability to use the L2 not only grammatically correctly but also socially and culturally appropriately. That is, grammar is not taught and learned as an end in itself but as a means to a communicative end. One of the implications of this approach is that grammar needs to be put in various contexts of language use, so that the L2 learner will be able to understand how the linguistic and communicative systems of the L2 being learned operate. In short, CLT emphasizes language use in the broadest sense of the term.

successfully across the board. Therefore, when applied to English language instruction, L2 acquisition implies that most L2 learners do not succeed in their attempts to learn or acquire an L2 (which is unlike first language acquisition—a truly successful story).

The dynamism of ELT, L2 and SLA is such that while SLA does not concern itself primarily with how an L2 should be taught and learned, it sheds light on the underlying processes that the majority of L2 learners go through in trying to “pick up” a second language, albeit with a high rate of failure. ELT comes into play here because it is argued that while any classroom intervention will not enable L2 learners to skip L2 acquisition stages, it helps expedite the whole process, for if L2 learners were to be left alone to figure out the L2, they would waste too much time unnecessarily in picking up such and such linguistic features. Therefore, Loewen and Sato (2017) argues that instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) plays a pivotal role, especially in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context like Thailand.

Grammar: The Necessary Evil—A Challenging Debate

A discussion of grammar and its role in English language teaching should begin with the meaning of grammar. According to Keck and Kim (2014), “... grammar is a system of rules which governs how words (and smaller morphemes) can be combined to form sentences” (p. 33). However, according to Ellis (2019), grammar can be categorized into prescriptive grammar and descriptive grammar. The prescriptive grammar refers to rules of language as explicitly stated in the grammar book with the implication that such a grammar rule may not be used in real-life situations. That is, prescriptive grammar focuses on what ought to be said and written based on the standard of English, whereas descriptive grammar refers to contextualized grammar that is used in real-life situations. In other words, what is right is always contextualized. Yet, there is another kind of grammar that is quite relevant: pedagogical grammar. According to Larsen-Freeman (2011), pedagogical grammar is concerned with the way in which grammar will be taught and learned most optimally in the second language

classroom. Further, according to Purpura (2004), grammar has the following dimensions: grammatical knowledge, grammatical ability, grammatical performance, and metalinguistic knowledge. In this regard, this study deals with grammatical ability and grammatical performance. While the former seems restricted to the academic context because it alludes to the learner's ability to do grammar tests accurately, the latter appears larger in scope because it emphasizes the learner's ability to actually use the language.

Based on the above explanations, it is obvious that grammar has been variously defined, and given the EFL situation where English is taught and learned in a school setting more than naturalistically, it will be remiss not to pay close attention to grammar and its roles in the L2 classroom because grammar seems to be the most tangible component for EFL learners to rely on. In other words, grammar instruction in a typical EFL classroom is the mainstay of language input for most of the EFL learners. As such, second language acquisition (SLA) researchers, over the years, have proposed an English instruction that strikes a proper balance between grammar rules (form) and grammar usage (function).

While focusing on grammar in context appears to have received considerable support, some researchers do not find grammar and grammar instruction necessary. For example, Krashen (1982) has proposed that to successfully acquire an L2, the learner needs to be exposed to considerable amounts of good quality language input that is not too difficult. In this regard, grammar will take care of itself because the L2 learner will be able to extract necessary grammar from large amounts of language input they have received. In addition, as long as the L2 learner is given a chance to enjoy the language through, for example, pleasure reading, fun-filled activities, he/she will simply "pick up" the L2 without fail. That is, acquiring an L2 is similar to acquiring one's first language. Those who are in favor of the non-grammar focus approach will find Krashen's proposition "practical and relevant."

The foregoing opinions about grammar and its roles in the L2 classroom suggest a grammar dilemma. On the one hand, grammar is

perceived as very important, the backbone of a strong linguistic body or as Larsen-Freeman (2011) put it, “grammar is a rich resource for meaning making, a tool of exquisite precision, allowing us to create forms in order to express delicate shades of meaning” (p. 45); on the other hand, grammar is shunned as a nuisance because, although without it, the L2 learner can hope to progress satisfactorily in their second language acquisition and learning. Certainly, the grammar dilemma is worth investigating, especially when the concept of grammar itself has been in the limelight even at the national level as expressed by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha mentioned at the beginning of this case. Given the importance of grammar as mentioned, this study attempted to answer the following questions: (1). What are the participants’ viewpoints concerning the roles of grammar in the teaching of English as a foreign language? and (2) To what extent do their viewpoints reflect the necessity of grammar and grammar teaching in the Thai EFL context?

Research Design

Participants

Since grammar plays a significant role in EFL instruction, especially adult EFL students and EFL teachers, the researchers realized that prospective participants would need to possess certain characteristics to be recruited, namely, EFL students who had had a number of English learning in the Thai education system and university English lecturers with certain teaching experiences, especially academic English or standardized tests which required knowledge of grammar in addition to other language skills. Given the research focus on the roles of grammar as mentioned, five categories of research participants were recruited as follows:

The first category concerned Thai university graduates enrolling in an English tutorial class (TOEFL) ($n = 20$). The participants in this category represented EFL students dealing with standardized tests. The second category involved Thai graduate students enrolling in an English academic reading course ($n = 63$). This category represented those who needed to learn how to read academic texts and journal

articles in English. It should be noted that the participants in categories one and two were administered two different sets of questionnaires because the nature of the courses they enrolled in differed from each other, although both definitely involved grammar instruction. That is, in the first category, grammar was tailored toward the TOEFL test format, whereas the second category aligned with sentence structures in academic English. The findings based on these two categories were analyzed quantitatively.

The third category involved award-winning, experienced Thai university lecturers ($n = 3$). These lecturers were accustomed to teaching both reading and writing in English for Thai EFL students. The fourth category was concerned with Thai university students enrolling in a pre-sessional class of academic English ($n = 30$). Again, this category represented adult EFL students preparing for academic English. The fifth category was concerned with Thai English lecturers with two-year teaching experiences ($n = 2$). This category represented English lecturers with non-extensive teaching experience who may have had differing beliefs about the roles of grammar in teaching English. The last three categories were analyzed qualitatively. Essentially, these five categories of participants were considered to portray a wide range of local stakeholders who may have had different perspectives on the roles of grammar.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), this five-pronged method of participant selection was intended to represent important elements of the research emphasis; all the participants were, in one way or another, directly involved with grammar when it comes to English as a foreign language instruction. Therefore, their viewpoints deserved a serious consideration.

As for the sampling methods employed, participants in the first two categories conformed to a typical sampling. The third category made up a unique sampling. The fourth category also constituted a typical sampling, and the fifth category represented a convenience sampling. These different cohorts notwithstanding, the participants represented voices of Thais teaching or learning English in Thailand.

They were key stakeholders with different beliefs and opinions concerning the roles of grammar in English education.

Instruments

Two sets of questionnaires were employed: one containing ten question items focusing on the roles of English grammar in the TOEFL tutorial class; the other comprising seven question items asking about the teaching of sentence structures and sentence analysis. It should be noted that these two sets of questionnaires, although administered to two participant categories (categories one and two, respectively), were intended to gauge their perceptions about the roles of grammar in their studies.

As for the validation of question items in the two questionnaires, three inter-raters were invited to gauge the validation. Each of the question items was assessed based on Index of item objective congruence (IOC). That is, each of the questions was to be rated using the following scheme: + 1 = agree; 0 = undecided; and -1 = disagree. The IOC score of the first questionnaire was 83.33%, and the second questionnaire received a score of 80.80%. Both percentages indicated that the question items were highly accepted.

Semi-structured and focus-group interviews were conducted with the participants in categories three, four, and five as mentioned above. The semi-structured interviews consisted of seven open-ended questions and the focus-group interviews consisted of eight questions. These questions were subject to validation through expert opinions. The interviews were intended to tap into the participants' perceptions concerning English grammar and the teaching of grammar in their respective classes.

Data collection

Two sets of questionnaires were administered to the participants in Category 1, 20 Thai university graduates enrolled in a TOEFL class; and Category 2, 63 Thai graduate students in an academic reading class. Although containing different items, the two questionnaires focused on the participants' points of views concerning grammar and

grammar teaching. In addition, the opinions of the participants in Category 3, three award-winning university lecturers, and in Category 5, the two newish lecturers, were elicited via semi-structured interviews. The fourth category, 30 Thai adults enrolled in a pre-session English course, underwent a focus-group interview lasting one and a half hours. The interviews were conducted in Thai and the interview questions were written in Thai and translated into English and so were the interview contents. Subsequently, the interview transcripts were analyzed resulting in salient themes in the form of viewpoints. Moreover, in order to achieve triangulation of the data sources, the five categories of participants were employed in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Findings and Discussion

This section presents information and a discussion of quantitative and qualitative findings. In so doing, the quantitative data based on categories one and two are first discussed, followed by a discussion of the qualitative data, Categories 3, 4, and 5.

Quantitative findings and discussion

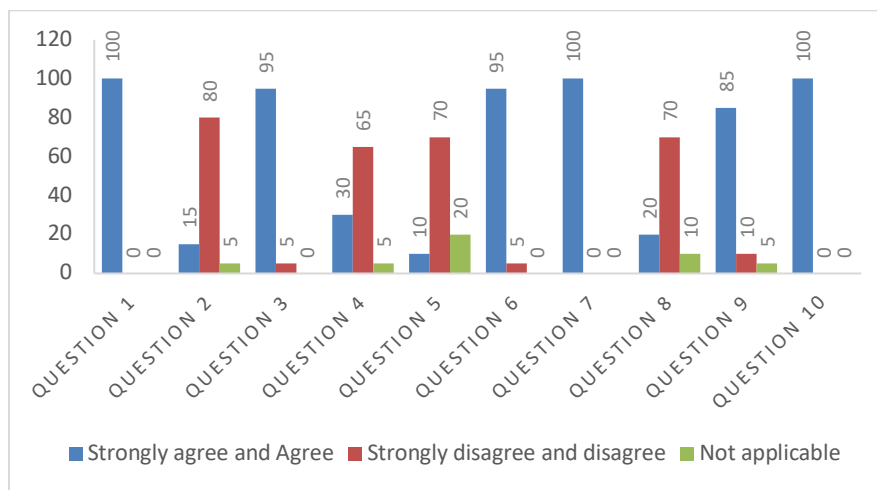
Views of the Thai university graduates taking the TOEFL class (Category 1)

The participants ($n = 20$) were asked about the roles and benefits of grammar instruction in their TOEFL class (see Figure 1 below). The patterns of responses were as follows: responses to Q1, Q7, and Q10, which were about the usefulness of explicit grammar teaching focusing on sentence structure (e.g., independent vs. dependent clauses), received a very strong support as shown in Figure 1. That is, all the participants were in agreement that the emphasis on explicit grammar instruction was useful. In addition, between 85% and 95% of the participants, in their responses to Q3, Q6, and Q9, found that explicit grammar teaching led them to think critically about sentence structures. It should be noted that the participants found the use of Thai, their L1, in the class was instrumental in their learning success (Q9). This was corroborated by their response pattern in answering Q8,

asking whether the instructor should have used English only in explaining grammar (Please refer to Questionnaire 1 in Appendix A).

Figure 1

*Data Distribution of Category-one Participants about Grammar Instruction
(n = 20)*



When it comes to negatively-worded questions about the roles of grammar (e.g., Q2), 80% of the participants disagreed that grammar was not necessary for communication. Response patterns of Q5 and Q6, which asked about whether vocabulary knowledge was prerequisite to their grammar knowledge, suggested that the participants did not find that the lack of certain vocabulary knowledge hindered their sentence understanding. It is also interesting that the majority of the respondents did not find English grammar learning difficult (Q4). This might be inconsistent with previous studies that suggested that grammar was very difficult for EFL learners in general.

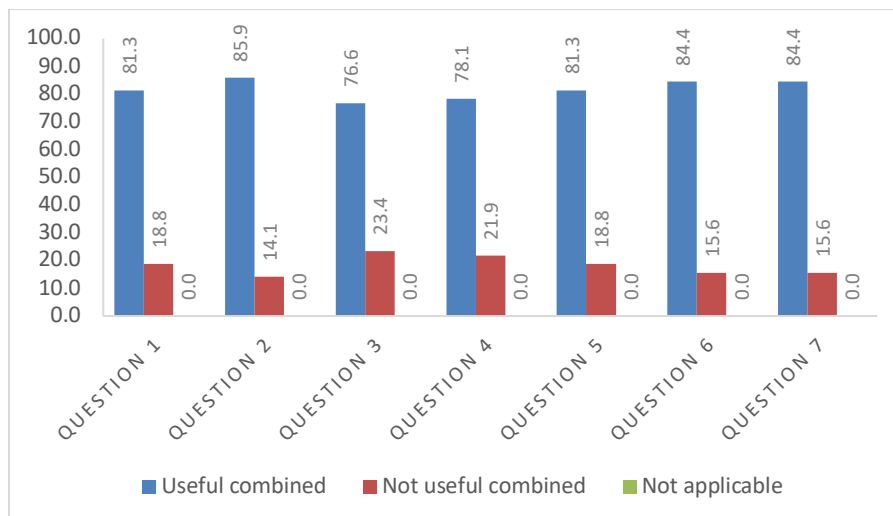
The patterns of responses of category-one participants clearly indicated that the majority of them were in favor of explicit grammar instruction and that teaching performances were conducive to the cultivation of positive attitudes toward grammar. The rather positive viewpoints concerning the roles of grammar in English instruction were also corroborated by response patterns of the category-two participants, which are reported below.

Views of Thai graduate students in the English academic reading course (Category 2)

As illustrated in Figure 2 below, overall, the participants ($n = 63$) clearly found the teaching of sentence structures, e.g., independent clauses, dependent clauses, and phrases useful. For example, response patterns to Q1 (types of sentences), Q2 (types of dependent clauses), and Q7 (application of types of sentences, dependent clauses, and phrases) indicated that the participants viewed explicit grammar instruction useful. Q4, Q5, and Q6, although focusing on vocabulary and reading at the sentence level, also pointed out that the participants realized that the grammar points in Q1, Q2, and Q3 were useful and that they could apply them to the sentence-reading exercises. It should also be noted that, for Q7 concerning the usefulness of dissection of sentence elements e.g., core parts, headwords, and modifiers, 84.4% of the participants found this exercise useful. It may be concluded, based on the general patterns of responses, that the majority of the participants realized the importance and utility of explicit grammar instruction, even in an English academic reading course at the graduate level. The content of Questionnaire 2 is shown in Appendix A.

Figure 2

Data Distribution of Category-two Participants about Grammar Instruction (n = 63)



Based on the responses as demonstrated in Figures 1 and 2 above, the majority of the participants representing two different groups of stakeholders, one in a TOEFL tutorial class; the other, a regular academic English reading class, had clear objectives in their English learning. The clear objectives led to strong motivation on their parts to attempt to learn English grammar in those two courses. Further, teaching performances may have had certain influences on how they formed their positive views regarding the roles of grammar in English education.

The next section is concerned with qualitative findings based on semi-structured and focus-group interviews. The points of views shared by the participants (categories 3, 4, and 5) are reported respectively below.

Qualitative Findings and Discussion

Views of the three award-winning teachers (Category 3)²

Dr. Pornapa Krairit, the first extraordinarily effective teacher who had received a teaching excellence award from a Bangkok university said that in teaching academic reading at her university she had to explain grammar rules at the sentence level. She said:

When I taught academic reading in English to my students, I started from teaching grammar at the sentence level. The students had to analyze sentence types such as simple, compound, and complex sentences. Also, they were asked to identify types of subordinate clauses such as adjectival clause, adverbial clause, and noun clause. Without focusing on sentence analysis as I did, those less able students would not be able to understand the whole thing. I think grammar itself is not a problem, but how we're going to help students see the relevance of grammar is very challenging.

²The three award-winning teachers are those whom I interviewed in a previous case study. They were Dr. Pornapa Krairit; Dr. Pavan Thira; and Dr. Saengdara Thongaram. They taught at three Thai universities in Bangkok. During the interviews, they talked about grammar instruction in the English classes they had taught and those ideas were reported in this study.

Dr. Pavan Thira, who taught foundation English to college students at a premier university in Bangkok, said in response to the question as to whether teaching grammar is important that:

You see...in my situation, I taught a course titled “experiential English,” in which I spoke only English to them. The course was an integrated skills course, meaning students were required to make use of the four skills of English: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. And about the role of grammar in my class, I would say that grammar was incorporated indirectly...For example, I tried to point out to them the kinds of mistakes they had made in both speaking and writing in English. I seemed to have condoned sporadic mistakes. We didn't dwell on grammar per se...you see.

Dr. Saengdara Thongaram, who taught a writing course at a Bangkok university, reported having prioritized meaning over form in her class. She said:

In teaching English writing, I didn't burden them with heavy grammar rules. I focused on getting them produce as varied ideas as possible so that they would not feel inhibited because of poor grammar and limited vocabulary. I also believed that standard grammar following British or American rules was not as relevant as students' creativity and opportunity to express ideas freely. Well...having said all these doesn't mean that I ignored grammar completely in my writing class. I saved it for later stages of instruction such as when I asked students to give feedback to one another. That's when students were focusing on grammar. It's not that grammar is not important, but it's more a matter of when and how to emphasize grammar.

The teachers' remarks about grammar instruction were indicative of the various degrees of importance they each assigned to the role of grammar in their respective classes. They all agreed that grammar was key, but what mattered the most was the ability to gauge the timeliness of grammar inclusion in class. This finding is strongly supported by a study conducted by Valeo and Spada (2016) that “... the timing of grammatical instruction [was] a distinct preference for

integrated form-focused instruction across groups (i.e., teachers and learners) and contexts (i.e., EFL and ESL) (p. 314).”

Representative Views of the 30 Thai participants (Category 4)

The focus group interview results revealed thought-provoking answers on the part of the group members. The participants were in absolute agreement that grammar did play a key role in their attempts to understand English sentences. Several of the participants believed that knowledge of basic sentence structures and types of sentences as well as subordinate clauses helped them to see the “logistics” of English sentences. Grammar is an important foundation on which to build the other skills of English.

Also, many of them concurred that learning English grammar at the sentence level reaffirmed their pre-conceived notion that English was not just about a matter of putting one vocabulary after another. Rather, to become fully competent in the language, they needed to know grammar as it is used in real life situations. Learning grammar in this pre-session session made some of them understand why they failed the pre-test they had taken at the beginning of this session.

As regards English knowledge and their work, many of them pointed out that when writing email messages, they now became more careful because first they had to check whether they had used a verb with a tense. Second, even though meaning to be conveyed was still important, they could not ignore the fine-grained elements of grammar, especially when writing to important customers and partners. Before they took the course, they did not pay close attention to sentence mechanisms because they erroneously believed that meaning mattered more than grammar. But now they changed their minds.

Another interesting remark was from a participant who said:

Before I took this course, I wasn't aware of the fact that the same word when used with different grammars was capable of different meanings. For example, the word “very” meant one thing when used as an adverb, but means quite another when used as an adjective. Admittedly, this was new to me, and now

I realize how important grammar is because grammar and meaning must go together.

Yet, one other remark concerning ELT is the following:

I personally don't like learning English, including grammar and vocabulary. But taking your class changed my mind a bit. Grammar could be understood if taught with care and appropriate techniques. I like it when you repeat those key points over and over again. For example, you keep saying that there are three kinds of subordinate clauses: noun clause, adjective clause, and adverb clause. Once these words are drummed into my head, I kind of get the idea and become a bit interested in class. So it's a matter of how grammar is taught rather than whether grammar should be taught.

The selected viewpoints above suggested that grammar has a clear place in the English curriculum, and that the point is concerned with how grammar should be taught, obviating the need to eliminate grammar in the EFL classroom. Indeed, the verbatim accounts above are a strong testament to the importance of grammar and, even more so, the importance of careful grammar instruction. The participants appeared to appreciate the roles of grammar in academic English. This appreciation implies that elements of grammar are useful and relevant, and this benefit is augmented through caring instruction.

Views of the Two Newish University Lecturers (Category 5)

When asked what grammar meant to the first lecturer with two years' teaching experience at a premier university in Bangkok, he said grammar referred to the structure of a language which involved morphology (the study of word formation); syntax (the study of sentence formation); phonology (the study of the sound system), and semantics (the study of meaning).

His explanation touched on the linguistic features, which are crucial building blocks for a solid linguistic edifice, so to speak. Consequently, he further argued that "*grammar should be emphasized.*" On a final note, he also pointed out that:

Focusing on grammar is a means of developing a cognitive monitoring device both for using a language in a systematic way and for mutually understanding the messages conveyed in a language. Also, focusing on grammar can help EFL learners understand the way a language is structured and used.

His responses appeared to concur with those of the second lecturer of the same premier university in Bangkok. This lecturer had had a very brief teaching experience (one semester), but who nevertheless was an enthusiastic teacher who scored very high on the English exam he had taken to become a lecturer. Indeed, when asked whether grammar should or should not be taught, he put it this way:

Suppose that we are going to teach an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) type of course to a group of factory workers who need to communicate with their English-speaking manager and co-workers, it is certain that grammar is not the primary focus. Instead, the communicative skills of the students play a more important role here, dealing with useful English expressions, certain technical terms, and the use of English for communication in general. However, necessary grammatical knowledge should not be neglected. The students should be able to construct simple expressions and conjugate some basic verbs to form their ideas. All in all, possibly it depends on these factors determining the importance of grammar, and I have to admit that even a tiny bit of grammar should be emphasized in a way that helps our learners achieve their goals and those of the courses being taught.

Although his answer was rather long, it struck at the heart of the grammar dilemma. Once again, he pointed to the very fact that this grammar dilemma should not be dichotomized in the first place. Myriad factors always come into play when a teacher wants to make a judicious decision as to the role of grammar in the English class.

It should be noted that the five categories of viewpoints concerning the role of grammar in the teaching of English as a foreign language all concurred that grammar is pivotal in learning or using an L2. No voice so far has declined the usefulness of grammar.

The participants across the five categories held positive viewpoints toward the roles of grammar in the EFL classroom. The response patterns clearly indicate that consciously learning grammar with clear objectives helped them to better understand the operations of grammar in use, especially in the academic context. The findings also point out that none of them rejected grammar and the teaching of grammar outright. That is to say, using metalinguistic explanations appeared to help them learn properly (Chan, 2021; Everly & Cai, 2021). Additionally, dichotomous thinking about whether grammar should or should not be taught is irrelevant. Clear instructional goals, motivation to learn and teach, and appropriate focuses on grammar instruction all combined to make the learning and teaching of English as a foreign language a success for the participants in this study. According to VanPatten and Smith (2022), when the L2 learner attempts to process language input, it is most likely that he/she will also try to arrive at the meaning of the input they encounter. Simply put, when taught grammar in context, the L2 learner is believed to have the opportunity to process those linguistic elements that eventually will enable them to come to terms with how grammar functions, hence forms and functions of language emphasized.

This study attempted to answer two overarching questions concerning the participants' viewpoints towards the roles and the necessity of grammar in EFL teaching. The aforementioned quantitative and qualitative findings discussed so far lend a strong support to explicit grammar instruction. Further, the participants across the categories did believe that grammar plays a pivotal role in effective use of English, academic or otherwise. The participants' argument for proper grammar instruction, by taking into serious consideration the course objectives, is reflected throughout the reports of both the quantitative and qualitative findings. It is evident that most, if not all, the participants concurred that dichotomous thinking regarding grammar and communication is a misguided attempt. This is a moot point for further research, but for certain, grammar is here to stay.

Conclusion

The many strands of opinions as expressed by the five categories of participants emphasized the importance of grammar in English language instruction in the Thai EFL situation. While the general public (as shown through the media and as exemplified by the Prime Minister's remarks) consider grammar "undesirable," the teachers and students discussed in this study believed that caution must be made to view the roles of grammar and grammar instruction. They realized that grammar is a *sine qua non* of a language; no successful use of language exists without it.

The general comment that because of an emphasis on grammar, Thai people cannot communicate in English seemed misdirected. In other words, the layperson's comment did not seem to properly define what was meant exactly by the term grammar. They tended to view grammar as a fixed system to be found in and recited from grammar books. This misperception of grammar was the root cause of the misinterpretation of the role of grammar. The literature as well as the ideas shared by the participants across the five categories pointed to this important idea that grammar is a main staple in learning and teaching an L2.

References

- Baker, W. (2008). A critical examination of ELT in Thailand: The role of cultural awareness. *RELC Journal*, 39(1), 131–146.
- Barrot, J. (2020). Revisiting the interface positions in second language acquisition: Towards a continuum-interface model. *The Journal of Asian TEFL*, 17(2), 616–625.
- Brown, S., Attardo, S., & Vigliotti, C. (2014). *Understanding language structure, interaction, and variation: An introduction to applied linguistics and sociolinguistics for non-specialists* (3rd ed.). University of Michigan Press.
- Chan, A. Y. W. (2021). Using metalinguistic explanations to help advanced ESL/EFL learners overcome their problems with the use of English articles and reference representation. *TESOL Journal*, 12(2), 1–13.

- Ellis, R. (2019). *Second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
- Everly, P., & Cai, S. (2021). From wrong word to right word: Equipping ELLs to make correct semantic choices independently. *TESOL Journal*, 12(3), 1–16.
- Galloway, N., & Numajiri, T. (2020). Global Englishes language teaching: Bottom-up curriculum implementation. *TESOL Quarterly*, 54(1), 118–145.
- Hiranburana, K. (2020). FRELE-TH: Springboard for holistic English educational reform. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 13(1), 62–75.
- Imsa-ard, P. (2020). Motivation and attitudes towards English language learning in Thailand: A large-scale survey of secondary school students. *rEFlections*, 27(2), 140–161.
- Jean, G., & Simard, D. (2011). Grammar teaching and learning in L2: Necessary, but boring? *Foreign Language Annals*, 44(3), 467–494.
- Keck, C., & Kim, Y. (2014). *Pedagogical grammar*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon Press.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2016). The decolonial option in English teaching: Can the subaltern act? *TESOL quarterly*, 50(1), 66–85.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2011). *Teaching language: From grammar to grammaring*. Thomson/Heinle.
- Liamkina, O., & Ryshina-Pankova, M. (2012). Grammar dilemma: Teaching grammar as a resource for making meaning. *The Modern Language Journal*, 96(2), 270–289.
- Loewen, S., & Sato, M. (2017). Instructed second language acquisition (ISLA): An overview. In S. Loewen & M. Sato (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of instructed second language acquisition* (pp. 1–12). Routledge.
- Loewen, S., Li, S., Fei, F., Thompson, A., Nakatsukasa, K., Ahn, S., & Chen, X. (2009). Second language learners' beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction. *The Modern Language Journal*, 93(1), 91–104.

- Mala, D., & Jikkham, P. (2016, March 9). Prayut launches free app to help students with everyday English. Bangkok Post. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/890604/prayut-launches-free-app-to-help-students-with-everyday-english>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. (2003). *Practical English language teaching*. Mc Graw Hill.
- Opasrattanakorn, O., & Soontornwipast, K. (2021). A mixed-methods study of the future qualifications of English teachers in the south of Thailand. *International Journal of Instruction*, 14(3), 661–684.
- Phuengpitipornchai, K., & Teo, A. (2021). You understand I na ka?: A study of comprehensibility of Thai English to foreign tourists. *PASAA: Journal of Language Teaching and Learning in Thailand*, 61, 1–32.
- Purpura, J. E. (2004). *Assessing grammar* (Vol. 8). Cambridge University Press.
- Robinson, P. (2010). Implicit artificial grammar and incidental natural second language learning: How comparable are they? *Language Learning*, 60, 245–263.
- Shintani, N., Li, S., & Ellis, R. (2013). Comprehension-based versus production-based grammar instruction: A meta-analysis of comparative studies. *Language Learning*, 63(2), 296–329.
- Simard, D., & Jean, G. (2011). An exploration of L2 teachers' use of pedagogical interventions devised to draw L2 learners' attention to form. *Language Learning*, 61(3), 759–785.
- Sugiharto, S. (2019). Communicative language teaching as situated practice: Moving beyond dogma. *TESOL Journal*, 10(2), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.433>
- Supasiraprapa, S. (2019). The effect of learning environments on Thai speakers' English L2 vocabulary depth. *PASAA: Journal of Language Teaching and Learning in Thailand*, 57, 101–132.

- Swain, M. (1985). Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition* (pp. 235–253). Newbury House.
- Todd, R. W., Pansa, D., Jaturapitakkul, N., Chanchula, N., Pojanapunya, P., Tepsuriwong, S., Towns, S. G., & Trakulkasemsuk, W. (2021). Assessment in Thai ELT: What do teachers do, why, and how can practices be improved? *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 14(2), 627–649.
- Tolentino, L. C., & Tokowicz, N. (2014). Cross-language similarity modulates effectiveness of second language grammar instruction. *Language Learning*, 64(2), 279–309.
- Valeo, A., & Spada, N. (2016). Is there a better time to focus on form? Teacher and learner views. *TESOL Quarterly*, 50(2), 314–339.
- VanPatten, B., & Smith, M. (2022). *Explicit and implicit learning in second language acquisition*. Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, J. (1998). *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition*. Cambridge University Press.

Appendix A**Questionnaire 1 for participants in Category 1**

(Likert scale: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree, and not applicable)

- Q1. Grammar helped me to better understand sentence mechanisms.
- Q2. Grammar was useful for the TOEFL class only, but not necessary for communication.
- Q3. Grammar tutoring made me realize that learning English doesn't mean just memorization
- Q4. It was difficult to learn English grammar.
- Q5. To understand grammar, I must know the meaning of the vocabulary in the sentence first.
- Q6. I could tell different parts of speech even if I didn't know the meaning of the vocabulary.
- Q7. The instructor's teaching helped me to better understand English sentence structure.
- Q8. The instructor should have used English only in explaining grammar.
- Q9. The use of Thai in explaining grammar was appropriate and helped me learn better.
- Q10. Had I been taught grammar the way the instructor did, I wouldn't be having the problem using English grammar now.

Questionnaire 2 for participants in Category 2

(Likert scale: very useful, useful, neutral, not useful, not useful at all, and not applicable)

- Q1. The extent to which contents and exercises about types of sentences (e.g., simple, compound, and complex sentences, etc.) are useful.
- Q2. The extent to which contents and exercises about types of subordinate clauses (e.g., adjective clause, adverb clause, and noun clause in apposition, etc.) are useful.
- Q3. The extent to which contents and exercises about types of phrases (e.g., prepositional phrases, etc.) are useful.
- Q4. The extent to which contents and exercises about vocabulary in context (e.g., various types of context clues, anaphora, and references, etc.) are useful.
- Q5. The extent to which contents and exercises about sentence comprehension (e.g., word senses, types of modifiers, and functions of modal verbs, etc.) are useful.
- Q6. The extent to which contents and exercises about sentence interpretation are useful.
- Q7. The extent to which contents and exercises about core parts, headwords, and modifiers (an application of dependent clause, namely a head and modifiers, etc.) are useful.

Appendix B

Semi-structured interview questions in Thai for the participants in Category 3

คำถาม

1. ขอความกรุณาอาจารย์เล่าเกี่ยวกับประสบการณ์การสอนภาษาอังกฤษอย่างคร่าว ๆ ด้วยครับ
2. จากประสบการณ์การสอนที่อาจารย์เล่ามานั้น อาจารย์มีความคิดเห็นอย่างไรเกี่ยวกับการสอนไวยากรณ์ในวิชาภาษาอังกฤษที่อาจารย์สอนครับ
3. ในความเห็นของอาจารย์ อะไรคือปัญหาใหญ่ในการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษสำหรับนักเรียนนักศึกษาไทย
4. ทำไมอาจารย์จึงเห็นว่าการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในบ้านเรา ยังจำเป็นต้องเน้นไวยากรณ์ครับ
5. สมัยที่อาจารย์เรียนภาษาอังกฤษ อาจารย์ชอบหรือไม่ชอบไวยากรณ์ครับ เพราะอะไรครับ
6. วิธีการสอนไวยากรณ์ของอาจารย์เป็นอย่างไรครับ อาจารย์คิดว่านักศึกษาสนใจหรือชอบเรียนไหมครับ
7. อาจารย์มีคำแนะนำอะไรไหมครับเกี่ยวกับการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในบ้านเรา

Focus-group interview questions for the participants in Category 4

คำถาม

1. นักศึกษามีความเห็นอย่างไรเกี่ยวกับการเรียนวิเคราะห์โครงสร้างประโยค เช่น simple, compound sentences
2. นักศึกษาเคยเรียนไวยากรณ์ลักษณะนี้หรือแบบนี้มาก่อนไหมครับ เช่น การวิเคราะห์องค์ประกอบของประโยค
3. ก่อนหน้าที่จะได้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในวิชานี้ที่ต้องวิเคราะห์ประโยคหลัก ประโยคย่อย และอื่น ๆ นักศึกษาเรียนอย่างไรครับ
4. ภาษาอังกฤษเกี่ยวข้องหรือจำเป็นกับงานในหน้าที่ของนักศึกษามากน้อยเพียงใดครับ
5. จากการเรียนวิชาภาษาอังกฤษกับผมในเทอมนี้ นักศึกษามีความคิดเห็นเปลี่ยนแปลงไปอย่างไรกับภาษาอังกฤษและไวยากรณ์ภาษาอังกฤษมากน้อยเพียงใดครับ
6. นักศึกษาคิดว่าปัญหาหลักในการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในบ้านเราคืออะไรครับ
7. นักศึกษาคิดว่าถ้าเรียนไวยากรณ์วิเคราะห์ประโยคมาตั้งแต่สมัยปริญญาตรีหรือมัธยมปลาย จะช่วยให้นักศึกษาเก่งภาษาอังกฤษมากน้อยแค่ไหน
8. นักศึกษามีความคิดเห็นอื่น ๆ ที่จะช่วยปรับปรุงเนื้อหา หรือวิธีการสอนวิชาภาษาอังกฤษที่เราเรียนกันไหมครับ