Students' Perceptions of Grammar Teaching and Learning in English Language Classrooms in Libya

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Abstract: *The use of grammar teaching in the field of second language acquisition has been extensively studied, but there is a lacuna in the literature, regarding the students' perception of its importance. To investigate this aspect, the study was conducted on a group of 15 students studying in Semester Five, in the English Language Department of Misurata University, Libya. The students were interviewed in groups of three with nine specific questions, and the responses were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The findings revealed that although they all came from the same cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds, they had different perceptions regarding the form focused instruction of grammar. The information gathered is of considerable significance to ESL teachers who intend to meet students' needs as well as reduce conflicts caused by different perspectives between teachers and students regarding whether or not grammar teaching should be encouraged in the classroom.*

I. Introduction

The role and method of teaching grammar in English language classroom has been a widely debated, controversial topic (Ellis 2006, Nassaji & Fotos2004). Researchers and language professionals in the field have either challenged or defended the form-focused grammar teaching and learning, and advocated what they consider to be the best method to meet the students' needs. However the studies have rarely looked into the learners' beliefs regarding grammar teaching in language classrooms. It has been observed that the students continue to make language errors-some of them very basic- even in their final semester of their undergraduate study. This has motivated the present researcher to conduct the present study.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Form focused and explicit grammar teaching

Form focused or explicit grammar teaching and error correction have been an age old practice in English language classrooms. It was the only method known and practised in Grammar Translation Method and Audio-lingual Method. It was based on behavioral psychology which emphasized the formulation of correct language habits. Regarding error correction, Jagemann wrote: " no faulty answer be ever allowed to pass" (P220). A proponent of Audio-lingualism, Brooks (1960), said: "like sin, error is to be avoided and its influence overcome, but it presence is to be expected… ...The principal way of overcoming error is to shorten the time lapse between the incorrect response and the presentation once more of the correct model"(P.56). However with the emergence of communicative approach in the early 70s, questions were asked about the suitability of the behaviourists' methods. Researchers like Krashen (1985), Terrell (1977), and Hammond (1988) argued against focus on form, and suggested that error correction may actually do more harm than good. Hammond argued that error correction had no value in speeding up the acquisition of the L2. Others suggest that it can actually raise what Krashen calls students' "affective filter," meaning that students' anxiety levels increase and therefore make it more difficult for them to study the language. The more recent communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches which minimize the importance of form focused instruction and explicit error correction are believed by some researchers to be inadequate,(Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell, 1997; Mitchell, 2000). In fact, research in linguistics indicates that some type of focus on grammatical forms is necessary if learners want to develop high levels of accuracy in the target language. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that grammatical awareness and error correction for certain grammatical structures may actually enhance L2 acquisition (Doughty, 1991; Fotos, 1996).

While there is abundant literature on focus on form and error correction in foreign language classrooms (Ellis, 2002; Schulz, 1996, 2001) and on teachers' perspectives (Farrell, 1999; Farrell & Particia,2005; Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001), little research has been carried out regarding students' beliefs on their use in the ESL classroom. Studies that do look at learners' beliefs typically focus on language learning in general and not on the role of grammar instruction in particular, although it has been the topic of many debates in the field.

2.2 Teachers' and Students' perception of teaching and learning grammar

Research literature in foreign language learning situations do seem to indicate that students find error correction and grammar instruction helpful in language learning. In fact, Schulz's (1996) study on the students' and teachers' views on error correction and the role of grammar instruction in a foreign language setting revealed that many students have a more favorable attitude towards grammar instruction than their teachers. The students also believed that in order to master a language, it was necessary to study grammar. On the other hand, more teachers than students believed that it was better to practice language in simulated real life situations than to study grammatical forms explicitly. Peacock (1998) pointed out various gaps between teachers' and learners' beliefs on foreign language learning, which were also observed in Schulz's study. He found that learners were much more in favor of error correction and grammar exercises than their instructors, while instructors rated pair and group work much more highly than the learners. Peacock concluded that there is a high probability that this has a negative effect not only on the learners' progress but also on their satisfaction with the class and their confidence in their teachers.

Is there a mismatch between the teachers and learners concerning the perception of the use of grammar? Horowitz (1990) asserts that there is and that this may often result in negative effects. The goal of her study was to determine students' beliefs on language learning so that teachers could bear them in mind while teaching. Kern (1995) believes that an awareness of this mismatch is important in understanding conflicts that could result in lack of motivation or anxiety. However, it is important not only to be aware of students' beliefs about the role of grammar in language learning, but also to understand how these ideas about language learning were formed. It may be that the students' prior language learning experiences shaped their beliefs. Alternatively, their teachers' beliefs about language may contribute to their choice of teaching methods, which in turn may contribute to the shaping of the beliefs of their students.

III. Methodology

This section discusses the research methods used in terms of participants, instrument, data collection and analysis.

3.1 Participants

The participants in the study were 15 students, of whom 10 were females and 5 were males. All the participants had the same educational background, had done their secondary education in Misurata, specializing in English, and had completed four semesters of undergraduate study at Misurata University. They had studied three courses in grammar, one course each in every semester from the 1st to 3rd semester. It was form focused, explicit instruction, with forms contextualized in sentences. All of them speak Libyan Arabic as their 1st language, and are in the age group of 17-19 years. At the time of conducting the study they were all studying in semester five.

3.2 The instrument (see Appendix)

The instruments consisted of responses to the questions: a) (i) What are the language learning experiences of the ESL students? and (ii) What are the ESL students' perceptions regarding explicit grammar teaching? (The concept of explicit and implicit grammar teaching was explained to the participants). And, b). responses to 7 questions during the interviews. The questions were meant to find out whether the students believed that grammar was important in language learning, whether teachers should teach grammar explicitly or implicitly, for which skills (i.e. reading, writing etc)grammar instruction was helpful, and whether teachers should correct students' mistakes in writing and/or speaking .

3.3 Data collection and analysis

As the interviews were conducted in group settings, the topics which emerged were guided by the interviewer but developed as a result of the group interaction. The conversations were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the transcriptions were examined by both the researchers closely.

In interviewing these 15 learners, we hoped to gauge their perceptions of explicit grammar teaching in language education. We also hoped to discover the origins of these perceptions. Our intention, however, was to gather this information without letting the participants know specifically what our research questions were. There were several reasons for this. First, we did not want to seem to be merely offering a choice between two extremes, namely, that grammar teaching was either desirable or undesirable. Second, since we each had our own views on the topic and our own hypotheses with regard to the study, we did not wish to influence the participants' answers in any way. Third, we hoped that by engaging the participants in conversation rather than confronting them with pointed questions that they would take an interest in discussing their language learning experiences. Essentially, we attempted to avoid an interview situation in which participants' responses might be shaped by their perceptions of what we wanted to hear.

IV.   Results and discussions

4.1 The importance of grammar in learning a language

During our interviews, all the participants strongly stated that grammar instruction was very important for a person to learn English. They formed their views based on their past learning experiences. At secondary schools and the undergraduate semesters which the participants have completed, grammar teaching is explicit. In addition, instructors in these EFL contexts traditionally teach with a focus on improving students' speaking and writing skills. The interviewees' perspectives seemed to agree with linguists' assertions in the research literature that explicit grammar teaching is beneficial to learners, despite the current movement toward a communicative approach to English language teaching (Richards et al., 2001). All the students interviewed considered grammar essential in learning English. Two of the interviewees-A and B, for example said, "If you don't know the grammar clearly, you can't organize your sentences. So you may speak in a wrong way" (Student A). "If your grammar is not correct, the sentence is not clear, people cannot understand you" (Student B). Student C also believed this, saying, "If your grammar is wrong, you can't write correctly." Student O also held these views, but added that occasional grammar mistakes should be accepted: ""I think grammar is important, but I don't think I need my grammar to be perfect. I think making a little grammar mistake is OK." Moreover, some students felt that there should be more focus on grammar in class. Their feeling was that although they had learned quite a lot of grammar before, they were still not very comfortable with it.

Though some students attached great importance to learning grammar, others did not share this view. Even though they came from similar language training backgrounds (favoring explicit focus on grammar), 7 students felt that grammar should not be emphasized in ESL language instruction. It could be picked up as they study more courses and with experience. They added that as there was no English speaking in Libya, either inside or outside of the classrooms, they needed more practice in speaking.

4.2 The place of grammar instruction in the classroom

Students had differing perceptions regarding whether, when, and how often grammar should be taught in the ESL classroom. Responses ranged from viewing explicit grammar instruction as unnecessary and ineffective, to a preference for explicit and frequent focus on grammar instruction in the classroom. This variety of opinions reflects previous studies (Ikpia, 2001; Imai, 2007) which found that the value learners placed on grammar instruction depended on their current language proficiency along with their previous learning experiences. Students who expressed the belief that explicit grammar instruction was unnecessary or inadequate seemed to do so based on their perceived language requirements at the time. Student A believed that learning only the grammatical rules was not enough, and that learners had to practice the language and apply these rules in their speech and communication with others in order to attain fluency. Student B agreed with those others who thought that students did not need additional grammar because most students had already learned grammar from their previous teachers and from books. Her concern was how to use these grammatical rules when speaking to other people. She thought that grammatical rules could be picked up through listening or talking to other people. She did not want to learn English in the same manner as she had learned it before. She assumed that students with higher language proficiencies could learn grammar in an implicit way and that there was no need to be taught in an explicit way as they learned when they were beginners.

These students had a relatively good proficiency with the language, had studied grammar explicitly in the past and now have different needs with regard to how they use English. At this stage, their opinion is that explicit grammar instruction is inadequate in meeting their current needs and they favor a more communicative approach, which they believe is more beneficial to their educational success and social life.

But some students countered the students' opinions stated above that grammar should not be taught in class. In their view, grammar instruction was beneficial even though they had had previous explicit grammar instruction. Student C, for example, believed that grammar was important, especially for writing. Grammar for him was a way of improving his writing. He suggested that if they received a grammar lesson once every other week, it would help the students to remember the grammatical rules:

If they give us advanced grammar every one other week ... one hour of grammar this is good for
our writing... just how to use this sentence, what is the meaning of this sentence ... when do we
use the present perfect or present perfect continuous ... if you give us information like remember
[remind] us every other week this is good you know ... maybe we have refreshed our memory…
to write a good essay.

Student D agreed with student E that grammar should be taught in class, but not excessively. She also wanted to be taught grammar in order to help her writing. Like student E, she thought that better grammar would lead to better writing. She wanted to "learn how to choose vocabulary, how to use the right word."

These opinions support Zeng's (2004) finding that learners valued grammatical instruction as a tool for communicating in an acceptable way, and especially for writing. For these students, writing descriptive answers /essays was an important element in their educational success and they saw a positive connection between

grammar instruction and effective writing. They viewed grammar instruction as a valuable part of an integrated approach to language teaching.

4.3 Which language skills need grammar instruction?

Students had different perceptions about the usefulness of grammar teaching and learning in different language skills. Some students believed that grammar was useful in writing. They thought that for writing, learners must apply different grammatical rules, and that a good grasp of these rules made it easier for them to identify their mistakes. Student A thought that grammar helped him the most in writing. He believed that his previous experience in learning the grammatical rules in his country was very useful to him. According to him, when people write they use longer sentences and concentrate more on the meaning, whereas when speaking, people use less complex language. Consequently, he believed that grammar became more important when writing. Students D and F agreed with the student A that grammar instruction was useful when writing. Their perception was that when they wrote they could use their grammar skills and that when they made mistakes they could correct them more easily. Students G, and H believed that in reading, grammar was very helpful. Student J claimed that if learners were not proficient in grammar they would face difficulties in reading and understanding, especially if they were confronted by long and complex sentences. Also, student K thought that knowledge of grammar facilitated the comprehension of academic articles, because "in academic articles, you often see a lot of long sentences. If your grammar is not good you can't understand them." Similarly, student L asserted strongly that grammar was very helpful for her in reading. She thought that when students read they faced some grammatical rules that they did not use in speaking or writing, and that therefore when they read, they should be aware of what these rules were and what meanings they carried. "We don't hear, we don't speak and in writing we write simple. I don't write a lot of grammar, difficult grammar. When you read you see sentences… grammar in them I don't understand. It is difficult to know what that sentence means. When I read and know the meaning of this word, this [is] verb, the present [tense]... these things. It is easy and grammar I think [is] important here." She added.

Student M felt that grammar was helpful in speaking. She believed that grammar could help her to choose the right words while she was speaking. She did not want to make mistakes when she talked to people. Accordingly, in her opinion grammar helped her to speak in a clearer manner. She said, "I think for speaking, grammar is very important. For me it's very important because sometimes when I am speaking, I think I am using the wrong word. Because I don't want to talk to somebody but use the wrong word."

The opinions expressed above by the Libyan students reveal that the learners believed that grammar was facilitating their language communication in writing, reading, and speaking. Their perceptions supported the study by Ikpia (2001) that students valued explicit grammar instruction because it enabled them to speak and write English properly.

4.5 Error correction and corrective feedback

The majority of the participants stated that teachers should correct their students' grammatical mistakes. With regard to the students' opinions of where this correction should take place, their responses reflected Schultz's (2001) findings that students almost universally value error correction, particularly in writing.

Student G thought that teachers should correct students' grammatical mistakes in writing and sometimes in speaking. She believed that when her teacher corrected her mistakes in writing she was able to recognize them more easily. She believed that when writing she could understand more easily why she had made these mistakes because she had the time to go over them again, while when speaking she was not able to remember all the corrections the teacher may have made. Accordingly, she found that having had her written grammatical mistakes corrected benefitted her more than having had her spoken ones corrected. Likewise, student M thought that teachers should correct more mistakes in writing than in speaking, saying that if teachers did not correct students' mistakes, learners would think that they did not have any and would therefore keep repeating the same mistakes. This view was supported by majority of the participants. Student K felt that if the teacher corrected her mistakes in speaking or writing it would help her to improve her English language learning. And if the correction was not made she would believe that there was no mistake. The same view was echoed by other students in the group.

Some students believed that when the teacher corrected their mistakes in speaking this would confuse them and they would lose their focus. They felt that students should be given the opportunity to finish expressing their thoughts verbally without any interruption.

Four participants thought that teachers should correct everything in learners' writing. They said that the teacher should correct vocabulary, grammar, and the organization of ideas and explain why they should "put this idea here, use this verb or that verb, put it in present or past perfect. This way we can know why here is present, why this paragraph should be all in past and next paragraph for example all future. This way we know

everything, the idea, the verb in past or future... you see... the whole thing on the paper. I think this kind of correction is important."

4.6 What are the pedagogical Implications?

Arising out of the above analysis and discussions are several pedagogical implications for the language teachers. As students and teachers may come from very different educational (some teachers in the Department of English in Libya, are of different nationalities) backgrounds, it is necessary to try to understand where the similarities and differences lie. There will often be differences between teachers' and students' perceptions regarding language learning, and understanding these differences may thereby reduce the conflict. Teachers and students who have contrasting ideas about the role of grammar instruction may experience conflict in the classroom, which may affect learners' motivation (Schultz, 2001). Students who are not motivated may become disillusioned with the language learning process. The present researchers do not suggest that teachers allow students to dictate their instructional methods; however, being aware of students' needs may encourage teachers to diversify their teaching somewhat in order to better address the learning styles of their students.

In order to come to an understanding, students and their teachers can participate in an ongoing dialogue, which would serve several purposes. First of all, it would allow the teachers to become aware of students' changing needs, and ideas of language learning. Second, it would help students to become more aware of each other's perceptions along with those of their teacher, and would also help them to be open to the realization that methods of language teaching and learning other than the ones to which they have already been exposed are also useful. They may not change their minds regarding their own preferences, but they would at least become aware of alternatives. Being aware of different learning methods/strategies can enhance the learning process.

V. Findings and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was not to discover whether or not it is necessary to teach grammar explicitly. It aws to find out what the students' perceptions were on focus on form and error correction, and where these perceptions came from. From this study, it seems that even students from similar backgrounds may have very different preferences regarding grammar teaching. But it was also evident that students do feel that there is a role for grammar instruction in language education. The students in the study, all having learned English in a foreign language setting, seem to agree that being in an ESL context, they need to have more of English speaking environment to improve their language proficiency. They agreed that in their past, grammar instruction had been helpful, but now it should be limited. There is no doubt that individuals do differ in the amount of explicit grammar instruction they wish to have and that their perceptions of the importance of grammar instruction will change with time and circumstances.

It is important for teachers to be aware of their students' beliefs regarding the role of grammar instruction. This does not mean that teachers should necessarily teach grammar if their students demand it, but rather that teachers can become more aware of the kinds of learning techniques that students are accustomed to and prefer, and how these ideas mesh with their own. In order to become aware of each other's beliefs about the roles of grammar instruction and error correction, it might be beneficial for students and teachers to begin dialogues such as those that took place during this study. This could be useful in different ways: such dialogues would make students become aware of learning methods and strategies that other students have found effective, and also, open and ongoing dialogues can be effective in minimizing the number of conflicts between teachers and students in the classroom.

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Appendix

Interview Questions
1. Have you studied any other language and for how long?
2. How confident do you feel with your English in reading, listening, speaking, and writing?
3. Why are you studying English?
4. Is grammar important in learning a language? Why or why not?
5. Should teachers teach grammar?
6. For which language skills are grammar instruction helpful?
7. Should teachers correct students' mistakes in writing and speaking? Why or why not?

Questions on ESL learning experience and explicit and implicit grammar teaching
a).What are your experiences of learning English language?
b). What are your perceptions regarding explicit grammar teaching?
 (The concept of explicit and implicit grammar teaching was explained to the participants).