

The Challenges of Grammar Learning and Teaching and Students' Perceptions in EFL Classes – Tishk International University, Erbil Case

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to evaluate the challenges of teaching and learning grammar in EFL classrooms, as well as students' views of those challenges. The study used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, including a questionnaire and in-person interviews, to achieve its objective. 56 EFL students from a private university in Tishk International University participated in the study. According to the study's findings, grammar plays a crucial role in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. The majority of students viewed grammar as one of the most challenging components of learning English, according to the survey results. The face-to-face interviews provided additional insight into the difficulties of teaching and learning grammar. The majority of students stated that grammar is extremely important and will contribute to their academic growth in foreign language study. The conclusion of the study is that teaching and learning grammar in EFL classrooms is a difficult process requiring greater attention and inventive ways. Teachers should explore adopting more interactive and communicative techniques in teaching grammar, such as using real materials and giving students opportunities to practice using language in meaningful circumstances, according to the research. In addition to this information, 80% of students felt it more advantageous to listen to a teacher discuss grammatical topics, regardless of how much they studied grammar independently.

Keywords: Grammar Learning, Grammar Teaching, Grammar Challenges, EFL Classes

1. Introduction

Grammar is a fundamental aspect of every language and plays a crucial role in communication. The correct and suitable use of grammar can aid people in efficiently communicating their intended message and avoiding confusion or misconceptions (Abdulrahman & Kara, 2023). Mastering grammar can be difficult for English as a foreign language (EFL) student due to the complexity of the language and the numerous rules that regulate its usage. Hence, the teaching and learning of grammar in EFL schools have become a prominent field of research, with scholars and practitioners attempting to develop successful strategies for addressing the issues of grammar instruction (Celik, 2016; Wang, 2010). In recent years, a growing amount of research has investigated the significance of grammar in EFL instruction and learning. Grammar teaching can boost learners' communicative competence by enabling them to use English more effectively, according to one of the primary ideas.

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According to De Guerrero and Villamil (2000), grammar offers the structural basis for a language and understanding it is essential for learners to convey their ideas and thoughts coherently. In addition, research has demonstrated a correlation between precise grammar usage and performance in other aspects of language acquisition, such as vocabulary development and listening comprehension (Skehan, 1998).

Nonetheless, despite the acknowledged significance of grammar in EFL teaching and learning, it is impossible to disregard the difficulties connected with grammar training. The complexity of English grammar represents one of the greatest obstacles. Many of English's numerous grammatical rules have exceptions, making them difficult for novices to master. In addition, students frequently struggle to comprehend the context in which particular grammatical forms are employed. For example, some learners may be able to construct grammatically sound sentences but struggle with employing the correct tense or preposition in a given context (Rohdenburg, 1996).

The lack of learner desire and interest in grammar training is another obstacle. Some language learners may perceive grammar as a tiresome and repetitive component of the learning process, and they may struggle to maintain interest and concentration during grammar courses (Dornyei, 1994). This can be especially difficult for EFL students who may not have a natural inclination for learning English and for whom English may be a foreign and unfamiliar language.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, EFL teachers can employ a variety of ways to solve the difficulties connected with grammar education. For instance, studies have underlined the necessity of offering adequate opportunities for practice and feedback to students (Long & Robinson, 1998). This can be accomplished through a variety of activities, such as drills, guided practice, and communicative tasks that allow students to apply the taught grammar structures in context. In addition, teachers can use a range of materials and resources, such as textbooks, internet resources, and multimedia, to design motivating and challenging courses that are engaging and exciting (Larsen-Freeman & DeCarrico, 2019).

In EFL instruction and study, the significance of grammar cannot be emphasized. Good grammar education is crucial for helping English language learners to utilize the language accurately and appropriately, hence boosting their communication skills. Nonetheless, teachers of English as a foreign language must be aware of the obstacles connected with grammar education and be willing to develop techniques to solve them. By offering abundant opportunities for practice, feedback, and engagement, EFL teachers can assist students in overcoming the challenges of grammar instruction and achieving their language learning objectives (Abdu & Nagaratnam, 2011).

2. Literature Review

For many years, teaching and learning grammar has been a focus of interest in the field of language education. Many scholarly perspectives have developed over time regarding the most efficient methods of teaching and learning grammar. This literature study investigates the diverse perspectives that academics have offered on this topic, based on several studies and research (Borg, 2015; Kara & Abdulrahman, 2022).

Focusing on form or function is one of the fundamental disputes in grammar instruction. Some researchers claim that teaching grammar based on rules and focusing on the form of grammatical structures is the most effective method for helping students master the language. Chomsky (2014), for instance, asserted that

people had an inbuilt ability to acquire language and that grammatical rules are an integral part of this process. Similarly, Krashen (1982) stated that in order to acquire a language spontaneously, learners must be exposed to understandable input, which includes the grammatical structures of the language.

Some experts, on the other hand, contend that teaching grammar in context and emphasizing the communicative role of language is more beneficial. According to this viewpoint, learners must observe the application of grammatical structures in real-world contexts in order to completely comprehend their meaning and application. For instance, Nunan (1991) proposed that grammar education should be placed in a communicative framework in which students can observe the language being utilized in authentic contexts. Larsen-Freeman (2003) argued that grammar should be taught as a communicative resource, with the aim of enabling learners to communicate their thoughts and emotions in the target language.

A related issue in grammar instruction is the distinction between explicit and implicit instruction. Explicit instruction involves teaching students the rules of the language directly, whereas implicit instruction involves giving students input containing the desired structures and allowing them to deduce the rules themselves. According to some experts, explicit education is more effective because it gives learners clear guidelines for utilizing the language (Kara & Abdulrahman, 2022).

For instance, Ellis (2002) argues that detailed instruction can help students recognize and integrate the grammatical structures of the language more successfully. Some experts, however, contend that implicit training is more effective since it more closely reflects the language's natural acquisition. For instance, Schmidt (1990) hypothesized that learners acquire language through exposure to information containing the goal structures and that explicit instruction may hinder this process.

The use of remedial feedback is a further concern in grammar instruction. Corrective feedback entails informing students of their flaws and directing them to the proper form. Some researchers think that corrective feedback is crucial for language learners to master the language since it informs them of what they need to improve. Long (1991) claimed, for instance, that corrective feedback can help learners acquire the language more efficiently since it allows them to self-correct and internalize the correct form. Some experts, however, contend that critical criticism can be demotivating and may not be beneficial in assisting students' development. For instance, Lyster and Ranta (1997) suggested that corrective feedback may not be beneficial for all learners and that learners may require a particular level of proficiency to benefit from it.

Lastly, there is a dispute on the use of technology in teaching and learning grammar. Some experts suggest that technology can be an effective tool for assisting language learners in mastering the language, as it gives them access to authentic material and individualized feedback. For instance, Warschauer and Healey (1998) argued that technology can assist students in overcoming the limits of traditional classroom training and give them the opportunity to practice the language in authentic circumstances. Other experts, however, contend that technology may not be useful in all situations and that traditional classroom learning may be more effective for some students. For instance, Stockwell (2010) argued that technology should be included in traditional classrooms.

3. Why is Grammar Important in Language Learning and Teaching?

Grammar is a crucial component of language learning and instruction because it provides a set of rules and structures that facilitate efficient communication among learners. So, grammar is essential for both the comprehension and production of language. Scholars and educators have long acknowledged the significance of grammar, and their findings indicate that excellent grammar training can improve students' language skills and help them communicate more effectively (Cook, 2016).

One of the key advantages of grammar training is that it enables students to comprehend the structure of a language. By understanding grammatical rules, students can begin to notice patterns and draw connections between various language components. This enhanced comprehension can result in greater fluency and precision when utilizing the language in real-world circumstances. In addition, grammar teaching can enhance students' capacity to grasp written and spoken language since they are better able to identify grammatical structures and analyze their meaning (Mart, 2013).

Consistently, research investigations have demonstrated that specific grammar education is highly helpful for enhancing language ability in learners. In research by Norris and Ortega (2000), students who received explicit grammar instruction performed better on examinations of written language than those who did not. In a similar vein, Spada and Tomita (2010) discovered that students who got explicit training in a particular grammar structure fared better on both written and oral language assessments than those who did not get instruction.

Effective grammar teaching can also help students improve their communication skills. By knowing and applying the rules of grammar, students can produce language that is grammatically correct and easier for others to comprehend. This can lead to increased confidence in speaking the language, as students are able to express themselves more precisely and clearly.

There are various techniques for teaching grammar in language education. Explicit grammar training is a frequent method in which students are taught the rules of grammar through planned lessons and tasks. Learners are exposed to grammatical structures through actual language use and acquire the rules of grammar through context through implicit grammar education. While both approaches can be helpful, evidence indicates that explicit instruction is more beneficial for enhancing grammatical knowledge and language ability in learners (Spada, 2011; Küçük, 2023a).

Moreover, grammar is essential for language acquisition and instruction. It enables students to comprehend the structure of a language, comprehend written and spoken language, communicate effectively, and improve their language skills. Effective grammar training can take on a variety of forms, but research indicates that explicit instruction is more effective at enhancing the grammar knowledge and language competency of learners (Mart, 2021). Educators must therefore construct comprehensive language-learning programs that include explicit grammar instruction and authentic language use and dialogue.

4. The Challenges of Learning Grammar for students

Learning grammar can be a challenging task for English as a foreign language (EFL) students. It is a fundamental component of language acquisition, and being able to use grammar correctly is essential to

communicate effectively in English. The difficulties faced by EFL students in learning grammar are multifaceted and can vary depending on factors such as their native language, the learning environment, and the teaching methods used. In this essay, I will discuss some of the main challenges of grammar learning for EFL students and provide relevant references to support my arguments (Shumin, 2002).

One of the primary challenges that EFL students face is the complexity of English grammar. English is a highly inflected language, with a complex system of verb tenses, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions. Moreover, there are many exceptions to the grammar rules, which can make it difficult for students to understand and apply them correctly. According to several studies, students often struggle with the correct use of verb tenses, articles, and prepositions (Larsen-Freeman & DeCarrico, 2019). These grammatical elements have specific rules and usage, which can be challenging for EFL students to comprehend, leading to errors and confusion in communication.

Another challenge for EFL students is the lack of exposure to authentic English. Most EFL learners are not exposed to native English speakers or authentic English texts, which can impede their understanding of the language. Students may struggle to understand the nuances of English grammar, including idiomatic expressions, phrasal verbs, and other colloquial language structures. Without exposure to authentic English, students may find it difficult to understand and apply grammar in context. Research has shown that exposure to authentic English materials can significantly improve grammar learning outcomes for EFL students (Scott & Balthazar, 2010).

Teaching methods can also pose a challenge for EFL students. Many language schools and teachers rely heavily on grammar-based instruction, which can be tedious and uninspiring for students. Moreover, the overemphasis on grammar drills and rote memorization of grammar rules can hinder the development of students' communication skills. According to research, EFL students who are exposed to communicative and task-based approaches to grammar instruction show better results in their grammar learning outcomes than those who are exposed to more traditional grammar-based instruction (Ellis, 2009).

Finally, another challenge for EFL students is the interference of their native language. The influence of the learner's native language on their grammar learning can lead to errors and confusion. For instance, learners whose native language does not have articles or a similar tense system as English may struggle with the correct use of articles and verb tenses. Research has shown that learners whose native language is grammatically similar to English, such as German or Dutch, have a more straightforward time learning English grammar than those whose native language is significantly different (Larsen-Freeman, 2001).

EFL students face various challenges in learning English grammar, including the complexity of English grammar, lack of exposure to authentic English, teaching methods, and interference from their native language. Understanding these challenges can help teachers design more effective approaches to teaching grammar, such as communicative and task-based instruction and the use of authentic English materials. By doing so, EFL learners can acquire the necessary skills to communicate effectively in English (Copland et al., 2014).

5. The Challenges of Teaching Grammar for Teachers

Teaching English grammar to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students is a challenging task that requires careful consideration of various factors, such as the students' language proficiency level, their learning style, and the teaching resources available. EFL teachers face many challenges in teaching grammar effectively, including students' limited exposure to English outside the classroom, the lack of engagement with grammar, and the use of traditional grammar-based teaching methods. In this essay, I will discuss some of the main challenges of grammar teaching for EFL teachers and provide relevant references to support my arguments (Larsen-Freeman, 2001).

One of the significant challenges that EFL teachers face is the students' limited exposure to English outside the classroom. As a result, students may struggle to apply the grammar rules they have learned in real-life situations. According to research, EFL teachers need to design activities that provide students with opportunities to use English in real-life situations (Watson, 2015; Küçük 2023b). This can include role-playing, games, and discussions that simulate authentic language use. Such activities can help students apply the grammar rules they have learned in a practical and engaging way (Küçük, 2023c; Bedir & Daskan, 2023).

Another challenge for EFL teachers is the lack of engagement with grammar among students. Grammar can be tedious and unappealing for students, leading to a lack of motivation to learn it. According to several studies, EFL teachers need to use a range of teaching methods to engage students in grammar learning (Celik, 2019; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). This can include the use of multimedia resources, such as videos and audio materials, as well as real-life examples and scenarios that demonstrate the relevance of grammar to students' lives. By doing so, EFL teachers can help students engage with grammar and see its practical applications.

Traditional grammar-based teaching methods can also pose a challenge for EFL teachers. These methods often rely on the rote memorization of grammar rules, which can be tedious and uninspiring for students. Additionally, such methods may not be effective for all students, as they may not cater to different learning styles (Yildiz, & Celik, 2020). According to research, EFL teachers need to use a variety of teaching methods to cater to different learning styles, including visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners (Fotos, 1998). This can include the use of mind maps, group work, and hands-on activities, which can help students understand and retain grammar rules better.

Finally, another challenge for EFL teachers is the difficulty of integrating grammar into communicative language teaching. Communicative language teaching emphasizes the use of language in real-life situations, which can make it challenging to incorporate explicit grammar instruction. However, research has shown that explicit grammar instruction can significantly improve language learning outcomes when integrated into communicative language teaching (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). EFL teachers need to strike a balance between the explicit teaching of grammar and the use of authentic language use to help students apply grammar rules in context.

EFL teachers face many challenges in teaching grammar effectively, including limited exposure to English outside the classroom, lack of engagement with grammar, traditional grammar-based teaching methods,

and the integration of grammar into communicative language teaching. (Celik, & Kapukaya, 2022) To overcome these challenges, EFL teachers need to use a range of teaching methods, cater to different learning styles, and provide students with opportunities to use English in real-life situations. By doing so, EFL teachers can help students acquire the necessary grammar skills to communicate effectively in English (Abdu & Nagaratnam, 2011).

6. Methodology

In this study, a mixed methodology was employed to merge student perspectives and collected data. The objective of a mixed method design is to classify, cross-check, and validate the validity of the acquired data (Greene, 2006). First, a literature study and a review of relevant research were done. In the second step, the scholars' studies on the challenges students have while learning grammar and the impediments teachers confront when teaching grammar were evaluated. In order to determine the impact of these studies on the students, a Google form was used to administer a survey, and a final interview was conducted with the students to find out what they felt about grammar instruction.

6.1 Research Model

First of all, studies on teaching and learning grammar on Google Scholar were examined. In this study, 56 students from the English Language Teaching (ELT) department of Tishk University, a private university in Iraq, were used. A questionnaire was applied to the students via Google Forms and their views on grammar learning were tried to be revealed.

6.2 Participants

This study was carried out in the academic year 2022-2023 and a total of 56 students participated. Of the students participating in the research, 35 of them are 62% are girls, and 21 of them 38% are girls. In the first year of Tishk University, an Iraqi private university, students study English in the English Language Teaching (ELT) department. The students' English proficiency is A2, and they express themselves fluently when speaking the language.

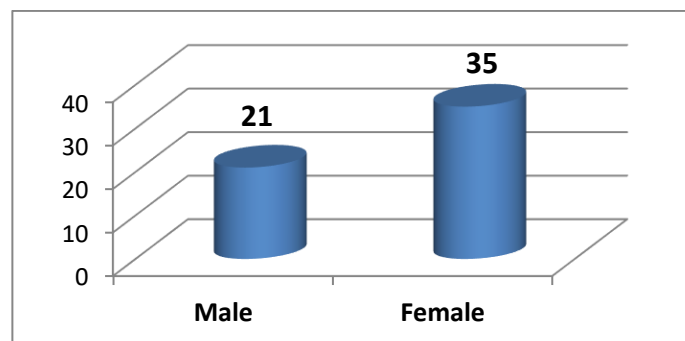


Figure 1: Participants` Gender

6.3 Sampling

56 students participated in the survey administered via Google Forms and the in-person interview. While examining the questionnaire below, we will study the data of all students, but just ten of the fifty-six students that participated in the interview will serve as examples.

7. Findings

This section's findings were acquired through two primary methods: a questionnaire and an in-person interview. In light of this, each piece has been analyzed separately, as detailed below.

7.1 The Analysis of the Questionnaire

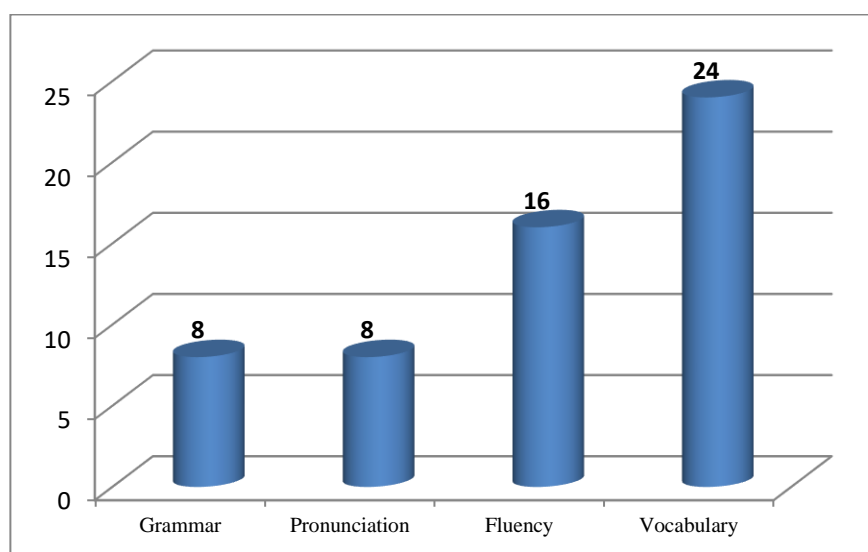


Figure 2: Which is the following is the most important for you in Language Learning?

The majority of pupils (43%) appear to prefer vocabulary over other language skills such as pronunciation, grammar, and fluency, according to the survey results. It is notable that, for 29% of the students, fluency remained a key influence. Since 14% of the students selected both pronunciation and grammar, it is important to recognize that these skills are also essential for efficient communication. In terms of pedagogy, these findings suggest that teachers should prioritize teaching vocabulary and fluency, while still ensuring that pupils have a firm basis in pronunciation and grammar. Also, it may be advantageous to individualize training and offer students the opportunity to concentrate on their specific areas of weakness (Richards, 2001; Küçük, 2023d).

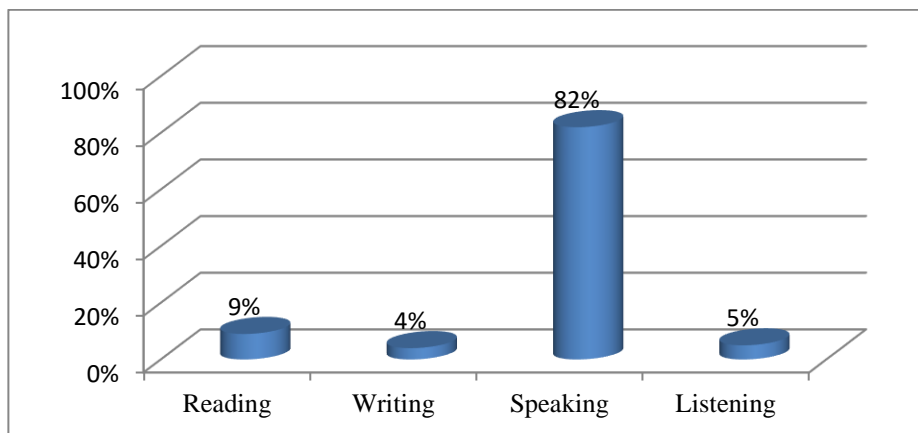


Figure 3: Which of the following skills do you think is the most important skill in Language Learning?

According to the comments of the students, it is evident that the majority of them consider speaking to be the most essential skill in language acquisition. 82% of students chose speaking as the most significant talent, whereas only a small fraction cited reading, writing, or listening as the most important skill. Communication is a vital element of language learning, thus it is not unexpected that the majority of students place such high emphasis on oral communication. Effective communication with native speakers of the language requires the ability to speak the language fluently and correctly. Speaking abilities let students clearly express themselves, engage in conversations, and develop meaningful relationships with native speakers. Notable is the fact that a tiny percentage of pupils selected reading, writing, and listening as key skills, but that these skills were deemed less important than speaking. Nonetheless, reading, writing, and listening are equally essential language-learning abilities that should not be disregarded. They are interrelated and mutually supportive of language acquisition (Rao, 2019).

Table 1: Students' Opinions on Grammar in English Language Teaching (ELT) classes

ITEMS	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1. I like learning grammar myself.	22	39	18	32	11	19	5	10
2. When my teacher explains, I learn grammar more effectively	19	34	30	54	7	12	0	0
3. I care about grammar when I speak English.	20	36	26	46	7	13	3	5

In the table above, 56 students were asked for their views on grammar, and a detailed analysis of the students' answers is as follows.

In Item 1, the statement "I like learning grammar myself" was presented to the participants. 22 students 39% selected the strongly agree option, and 18 students 32% selected the agree option. These data show us that 71% of students choose to learn grammar on their own. The remaining 69% of the students chose the disagree and strongly disagree options, but this is a low rate according to the first data.

In Item 2 students were given the statement "When my teacher explains, I learn grammar more effectively". In sum, 88 percent of 44 students selected the strongly agree or agree option. This indicates that although students prefer to study independently, they are more successful when they listen to their teachers discuss grammar topics. Only 12% of the group chose the disagree option.

In Item 3, students were asked whether they paid attention to grammar while speaking English. 20 of the students that participated in the study selected highly agree, while 26 selected the agree option. This number illustrates the significance of grammar in students' English speech and demonstrates that students place a high value on grammar.

7.2 The Analysis of the Interview

In this section, the opinions of 56 students about grammar were taken, but we will present the answers of 10 students as an example.

I believe that understanding grammar in English classes is crucial for enhancing my writing and speaking abilities. It helps me communicate more effectively and with greater confidence in many circumstances. (Student 4)

I enjoy how my English teacher teaches grammar principles such that they are simple to comprehend and implement. It makes language learning less intimidating and more pleasurable. (Student 9)

I find grammar instruction in English classes monotonous and uninteresting. I dislike repeated drills and exercises, which decreases my motivation to learn the language. (Student 14)

I enjoy how learning English grammar forces me to think critically and analytically about the language. It aids my comprehension and appreciation of its structure and intricacies. (Student 17)

I believe that understanding grammar in English classes improves my comprehension of what I read or hear in English. It increases my confidence in my language abilities. (Student 31)

I believe that the emphasis on syntax in English education hinders the originality and natural flow of the language. That decreases my desire to study English and increases my frustration with the regulations. (Student 34)

I appreciate the practical tasks and activities my grammar instructor utilizes to teach us the subject. It helps me apply the rules to real-world situations and reinforces my understanding. (Student 39)

I value how learning English grammar in class has enhanced my academic success in other courses. It has improved my analytical and problem-solving abilities. (Student 43)

I appreciate how learning English grammar has increased my awareness of my own language usage. It enables me to see and correct my own errors, improving my communication skills. (Student 47)

I believe that understanding grammar in English classes will benefit my professional possibilities in the future. Excellent communication skills are crucial in any job, and my command of correct grammar helps me stand out. (Student 51)

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study was done to gather the opinions of English Language Teaching (ELT) class students regarding grammar instruction. When this study was being conducted, previously published papers on the subject were investigated and evaluated. All of the research concluded that the significance of grammar in language acquisition and instruction cannot be emphasized. Based on the results of the questionnaire and interview, it is clear that students acknowledge the importance of grammar in language acquisition and consider it a crucial aspect of language learning. In reality, many students have said that a thorough knowledge of grammar is necessary for language proficiency. Similarly, teachers play a crucial role in assisting pupils to properly learn and practice grammar. Teachers can assist students in gaining a deeper understanding of grammar principles and applying them effectively in context by offering specific instruction and practice opportunities.

Incorporating grammar training into classes can help teachers better meet the requirements of their students and enhance their teaching effectiveness. By giving clear and precise instruction, teachers can help students comprehend and accurately apply complicated grammatical principles in a variety of circumstances. Teachers can better evaluate student progress and pinpoint areas for growth if they incorporate grammar education into their lessons.

Yet, both teaching and studying grammar can offer obstacles for students and instructors. Traditional techniques of teaching grammar, such as memorization and repetition, may be unproductive or uninteresting to a number of pupils who fail to comprehend difficult grammatical principles. In addition, teachers may struggle to make grammar education relevant and engaging for pupils.

Clearly, grammar remains an essential aspect of language learning and instruction. Teachers can assist students in developing strong grammar skills and achieving their language learning objectives by employing effective teaching strategies and addressing any obstacles.

Overall, grammar is an integral part of language learning and instruction. It is obvious from the results of the questionnaire and interview that both students and teachers appreciate the significance of grammar in language learning and comprehends the advantages of successful grammar training.

This study will be a useful resource for those who will research how students and teachers accept grammar. In future studies, if it is supported by quantitative studies, a pre-test at the beginning of the study and a post-test at the end of the study, clearer results will emerge.

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