

## Research Article

# TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT TEACHING GRAMMAR TO ADOLESCENTS: IMPLICIT OR EXPLICIT?

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### ABSTRACT

The degree of emphasis on grammar and how it should be taught has always been an issue of controversy among practitioners. The current qualitative case study explored Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions regarding grammar instruction and looked into their views regarding explicit/implicit dichotomy. The findings revealed that the participants believed that explicit instruction is more beneficial for adolescents in EFL situations. However, retaining interactive and communicative classroom practices should also be of focus. Besides, teachers' expertise in explicit grammar instruction is necessary. Teachers should be well-prepared in grammar teaching sessions and when providing corrective feedback. Similarly, the role of grammar in improving learners' language proficiency and its function as a problem-solving activity should be considered an advantage. The study has implications for teachers and curriculum developers in EFL situations.

**Keywords:** Adolescents, Explicit Teaching, Grammar, Implicit Teaching, Teachers' Perceptions.

### INTRODUCTION

ELT witnesses a controversy regarding the role of grammar in improving EFL learners' language proficiency. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, most English classes focused on grammar since, according to Richards and Renandya (2002), knowing grammar rules was vital for gaining competence in English. However, the early 1970s witnessed a decline in concentrating on grammar in the process of second or foreign language teaching. New understandings regarding the components of communicative competence clarified that grammar was merely one of the components and by no means sufficient for language learning (Richards & Renandya, 2002). The Communicative Language Teaching movement, which tried to change language teaching perspectives from emphasis on language structures to communication, appeared during the 1970s and became widespread during 1980s and encountered a decline with the development of Task-based Language Teaching, the emergence of which gave rise to new perspectives regarding grammar instruction (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Debates on the role of grammar in language proficiency have opened different perspectives for teaching it. Krashen's (1981) differentiation between acquisition and learning highlights that explicit teaching of grammar rules does not result in learners' unconscious knowledge of the language, and it is only helpful for monitoring language production. It cannot result in the ability to produce natural language in ongoing communication. Another view of grammar instruction underlines explicit instruction; however, it opposes decontextualized presentation of grammar rules. Learners should be exposed to grammatical rules and use them in different situations until they become part of their language knowledge. Nassaji and Fotos (2011) argue that if learners are provided with communicative situations to practice the rules, they have learned explicitly, their accuracy will improve, and they will have easier access to linguistic forms. The dilemma of teaching grammar shows itself in Long's (1991) Focus on Form (FonF) and his

differentiation between Focus on Forms (FonFs), Focus on Form (FonF) and Focus on Meaning (FonM). FonFs emphasizes language structures via presenting grammatical forms (Ellis *et al.*, 2002), whereas, FonF draws learners' attention to grammatical forms incidentally during communication (Long, 1991). In other words, in FonF practices, teachers draw learners' attention to the language structures produced erroneously. Teachers' role is to emphasize the problematic areas explicitly and encourage learners to notice forms while providing them with a communicative classroom situation (Ligthbown & Spada, 1990; Doughty & Williams, 1998). FonF instruction encourages teachers and learners to pay attention to grammatical structures while being involved in communicative tasks in the classroom. This way, FonF mediates between FonFs and FonM (Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998). FonF allows learners to focus on meaning and learn new grammatical forms (Ellis *et al.*, 2001). As Ellis (2005) argues, explicit grammar instruction facilitates gaining linguistic competence; thus, exposure to FonF instruction is necessary for adults. The debate regarding the importance of grammar in EFL/ESL classes has led teachers to reflect on the role of Form-focused Instruction (FFI) in classroom activities (Brown, 2001). FFI refers to drawing learners' attention to grammatical forms either implicitly or explicitly (Ligthbown & Spada, 1990). This definition seems important because classroom activities should be designed to encourage learners to notice linguistic elements in communicative tasks (Ellis, 1997; Rashtchi & Gharanli, 2010). However, as Doughty and Williams (1998) put forth, while teachers draw learners' attention to grammatical forms, the dominance is with meaning in FFI. The point is that when learners encounter problems in communicating with peers or the teacher due to a lack of sufficient grammar knowledge, different strategies for FonF should be used (Ellis, 2006; Rashtchi & Khosroabadi, 2009). Several researchers have verified the role of FonF in SLA (e.g., Norris & Ortega, 2000; Ellis, 2002). Thus, the role of teachers who implement the most valuable techniques in EFL/ESL classes requires specific attention. Ling (2015) believes explicit grammar instruction is necessary for accurate output. However, implicit instruction leads to more interactive learning, produces messages or content instead of accurate sentences, and converts input to intake (Birsan, 2012). Several studies have focused on

implicit and explicit grammar teaching (e.g., Rashtchi & Mohammad Yousefi, 2016, 2017; Rashtchi & Pirali, 2017; Soleimani *et al.*, 2015). However, surveys on teachers' perceptions regarding the usefulness of each type of instruction for adolescents are not very frequent. As Schulz (2001) puts forth, focusing on teachers' perceptions regarding different classroom practices, including grammar teaching, can be illuminating and can contribute to the SLA domain. In one study, Burgess and Etheington (2002) explored ideas about grammar and grammar teaching among teachers of English for academic purposes in British universities. Their study indicated that explicit grammar could not be ignored in teaching the language. Basos (2014) surveyed 86 pre-service teachers' perceptions of grammar instruction. The study revealed that most participants perceived grammar as essential for promoting reading and writing skills and preferred implicit to explicit instruction. In another study, Sopin (2015) explored teachers' perceptions regarding grammar instruction in English classes. The teacher-participants verified the importance of grammar instruction and mostly acknowledged the positive role of explicit teaching. Besides, they asserted that form-focused instruction could facilitate language learners' grammatical accuracy. Mohammadi and Yousefi (2019) investigated Azeri and Persian-speaking EFL teachers' and learners' perceptions regarding explicit grammar teaching. They found that linguistic differences have a decisive role in teachers' and learners' beliefs about the type of grammar instruction and feedback they receive. The purpose of the present study was to explore EFL teachers' perceptions regarding teaching grammar in classes with highschoolers. The researcher intended to discover teachers' thoughts about the explicit/implicit dichotomy for teaching grammar to adolescents in English language classes. Thus, she designed a qualitative case study and proposed the following research question to obtain her objective:

**RQ: What are Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions regarding teaching grammar to adolescent EFL learners?**

## Method

### Participants

Six English language teachers teaching in high schools in Tehran who were selected based on purposive sampling participated in the present study. Three of them taught English to boys and three to girls aged between 13 to 17. The teacher-participants had years of teaching experience, from five to eight years. Three participants were men, and three were women, and their ages ranged from 30 to 35. The teacher-participants were Persian native speakers and had learned English as a foreign language in language classes. Their scores on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) were between 8 and 8.5, and they had master's degrees in TEFL. The teachers agreed to participate in interview sessions and signed informed consent before the study. The researcher also asked for their permission to record their voices. Their voices were then transcribed and sent to them. They verified that the content of the transcripts aligned with what they meant. Each interview session took about 30 minutes.

### Instrument

The researcher collected the required data through interviews. She first extracted six questions based on reviewing the literature. Three university instructors content-validated the questions for relevance and wording and removed two questions. The remaining questions formed the data collection instrument (Appendix). However, two questions were added to the interview to establish a friendly relationship with the interviewees. They had no role in the study's primary data collection procedure (Questions one and two).

The participants' responses were categorized based on the extracted themes.

## Findings

Participants' answers to the interview questions were analyzed based on the most frequent themes. Each question was examined and thematized separately.

To what extent do you think grammar is essential in teaching English to adolescents?

The respondents believed that grammar is an essential part of language teaching. They agreed that the primary importance of teaching English is communication, which cannot be achieved without interactive classes. Teachers should try to provide learners with situations where communication occurs. Dialogues, role-plays, films, and games are good examples of activities that cultivate class interaction and keep the classroom atmosphere lively. However, without explicit grammar instruction, the students cannot develop accuracy in language. Grammar helps learners take language learning seriously and consider it a lesson they must learn. Besides all interactive activities, grammar is necessary and helps students focus on what they produce. Grammar tasks and activities should encourage learners to think about language structure. The following three excerpts can clarify the participants' views:

*"Although the main goal of language learning is communication, without grammar knowledge, we can face a pidgin-like language."*

*"Grammar is the serious part of the language. It helps students learn the language based on rules and produce well-formed sentences."*

*"Being able to use language in authentic situations is one objective, but being able to use language correctly is also one function of knowing a language."*

### Do you prefer explicit or implicit grammar instruction? Why?

The teachers' answers to the second question were interesting. Although the respondents acknowledged that implicit grammar teaching is the most appropriate way according to the literature, they believed explicit teaching is more beneficial for high school students in EFL situations. The teachers maintained that implicit teaching is much easier to handle and asserted that explicit teaching needs a deep understanding of grammar rules. Teachers should spend ample time, prepare themselves for instruction, and be ready for explanations and exceptions to grammar rules. However, implicit teaching is more straightforward. The teachers confirmed that in implicit teaching, sometimes some errors are overlooked, and fossilization might occur. However, the interviewees agreed that by explicit teaching, they are not underscoring traditional grammar teaching:

*"Explicit teaching should be in the form of exciting games and activities or what is known as FonF. In fact, when I talk about explicit instruction, I do not mean a teacher going to the board and writing the rules of language. It could be in the form of noticing, explaining, or finding peers' erroneous productions during being involved in discussions on topics of interest for learners."*

### What do you think about adolescents' attitudes toward grammar instruction?

The interviewees unanimously agreed that learners do not favor grammar. They mentioned that when they teach grammar, learners

seem attentive; however, they are sometimes confused. But then again, they feel happy after understanding a grammar point and using it in productive skills (speaking and writing) and receiving the teacher's approval. The respondents expressed that correctly using grammatical issues gives learners a sense of achievement. They also believed that thinking about grammar triggers learners' problem-solving and inferencing skills. Two extracts from the interviews are as follows:

*"Teenagers do not like grammar, and too much emphasis on it can make them bored and develop negative attitudes. However, after learning, they feel a sense of achievement."*

*"They avoid grammar because it is difficult, but teachers should talk about its benefits and encourage learners to get engaged in learning grammar rules."*

### What are some problems in teaching grammar (implicit or explicit)?

The teachers believed the excessive focus on explicit grammar teaching could hinder language learning. However, they believed that explicit corrective feedback is necessary and promotes accuracy. Establishing a balance between meaning and form is complicated, and their trade-off requires teachers' expertise. Drawing learners' attention to form is intricate as they easily get distracted. However, all teachers preferred combining form and meaning in the classroom. Teachers should be well-prepared and ready for students' numerous questions, sometimes resulting in a chaotic classroom environment. Teachers should be prepared for students' misbehavior and try to solve problems in a friendly manner. Focusing on grammar creates a serious atmosphere most teenagers do not like. Teachers should be ready to contextualize grammar and spend a relatively short time on grammar each session. FonF tasks, noticing tasks, and communicative and meaningful activities should be the center of grammar classes. Some viewpoints were as follows:

*"You should always have plenty of options to resort to when teaching grammar."*

*"Merging form and meaning is the best way to make use of class time."*

*"Students at this age are difficult to control, and teaching grammar adds to the difficulty."*

## DISCUSSION

The teachers' answers to the first interview question indicated that teaching grammar is necessary for language learning and should be an inseparable part of classroom practices. One point essential to consider is that EFL situations where learners do not have natural exposure to language are incomparable to the ESL context. In Iran, learners do not have the opportunity of exposure to language in the environment, and thus explicit instruction of grammar seems necessary. This finding is in line with Rashtchi and Keyvanfar (2012), who argued that grammar is essential for improving language proficiency. Interviewees' views in this study align with Basoz's (2014) and Sopin's (2015) participants that grammar instruction is an indispensable part of language learning. The teachers' answers to the second interview question again indicated the efficacy of explicit grammar instruction in EFL situations. However, the responses revealed that implicit grammar teaching was superior to implicit and easier to handle in the classroom. The priority of explicit grammar instruction to implicit method is reflected in Nassaji and Tian (2010), who reported that proactive FonF is more beneficial for learners at beginner and intermediate levels. Besides, as Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998) argue, referring to learners' errors should

be explicit, although according to Long (1991), attention to form should happen incidentally and via meaningful interactions. The superiority of explicit grammar teaching has been verified in different studies. For example, Altun and Dincer (2020) reported that explicit instruction could improve the learners' grammar knowledge and writing ability in their study. Likewise, Khodaeian *et al.*, (2021) compared implicit and explicit instructions with a control group's performance and found that explicit instruction was significantly beneficial for grammar instruction. The study by Rashtchi and Khosroabadi (2009) also indicted the superiority of explicit grammar teaching to adult beginners. The participants asserted that adolescent English learners did not appreciate grammar. This finding should draw teachers' attention to look for different ways of making teaching grammar attractive. As the participants stated, limited time should be spent teaching grammar rules. Games, dialogs, discussions, and debates could be fascinating formats for teaching rules and giving corrective feedback to adolescents. This view highlights the importance of FonF tasks in English teaching classes (Rashtchi & Keyvanfar, 2012). However, the advantages of grammar, like cultivating problem-solving ability and inferencing among adolescents, should not be overlooked. The last interview question dealt with the problems of teaching grammar. The teachers asserted that teaching grammar to adolescents was challenging, and teachers should always look for activities and tasks to conduct in class. Teachers' creativity and spontaneity are necessary factors in teaching grammar to adolescents. Over-emphasis on grammar should be avoided; however, explicit grammar teaching in EFL classes is essential for accuracy (Oandasan, 2016). The findings align with Long (1998), who asserts that FonM activities cannot be sufficient for language learning and that employing classroom practices aiming at language forms is vital for promoting language proficiency.

## CONCLUSION

The current case study explored Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions regarding explicit and implicit dichotomy in teaching grammar. The findings verified that explicit grammar instruction is beneficial for EFL situations. However, the participants asserted that excessive focus on grammar could have drawbacks for learners; limited time should be allotted to teaching grammar in each session, and grammar instruction should be in the format of FonF, accompanied by engaging activities to draw learners' attention to grammar. Grammar teaching is advantageous as it develops accuracy, cognitive involvement, and problem-solving abilities. The study shares the experiences of language teachers who teach in EFL situations. EFL teachers can reflect on the findings and decide about their classroom practices. Curriculum developers can also consider the teachers' views and probably prioritize activities and techniques that preserve explicit grammar teaching. This study was conducted on only a few selected teachers based on purposive sampling. However, it can have merits in stimulating teachers' perspectives on grammar instruction.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview Questions

\*Please introduce yourself in the way you like and talk about your teaching experience.

\*How do you perceive teaching in general? Do you enjoy teaching?

1. To what extent do you think grammar is essential in teaching English to adolescents?
2. Do you prefer explicit or implicit grammar instruction? Why?
3. What do you think about adolescents' attitudes toward grammar instruction?
4. What are some problems in teaching grammar (implicit or explicit)?