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## Unpacking the Discrepancy between Learner and Teacher Beliefs: What should be the Role of Grammar in Language Classes?

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**Abstract:** Learner and teacher beliefs play an important role in second language (L2) learning. Furthermore, the role of grammar instruction and error correction in the L2 classroom is a topic that is still debated in the literature. This study explored the beliefs of EFL learners and teachers regarding the controversial role of grammar instruction and error correction. A total of 17 instructors and 60 students at a private Turkish university participated in the study. The participants completed an open-ended questionnaire and interviewed regarding their beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction. Themes emerging from the qualitative data were identified. As a result of this study, it can be said that both learners and teachers believed in the importance of grammar in language and error correction, however there were some differences between the learners and teachers regarding the use of native language in grammar teaching and other areas of grammar teaching.

**Keywords:** *Language teaching, beliefs, role of grammar*

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### Introduction

Understanding learner and teacher beliefs has been an important part of education. A belief is a “mental state that is accepted as true by the person holding it” (Inceciy & Dollar, 2011, p. 3394). Beliefs are influenced by our emotions although they may be conscious or unconscious (Borg, 2001). Since beliefs determine our thoughts and behavior, learners’ and teachers’ beliefs about language learning also play a significant role in their acquisition of language. Learners often have beliefs about language learning based upon their prior experiences. This is especially true for older learners (Davis, 2003). Therefore exploring the beliefs of learners would allow teachers to develop lessons that cater to the needs of individual learners and provide flexibility (Brown, 2009).

Although there have been numerous research regarding the learner and teacher beliefs about overall language learning, specific aspects of language learning have not been extensively investigated. Given the significance of learner and teachers’ beliefs in specific aspects of language learning, this study has explored the beliefs held by EFL learners about grammar instruction and error correction.

### Literature Review

#### *Beliefs and their Significance in Language Education*

As Dörnyei (2009) expressed, “there are many agencies and variables that underpin language phenomena...” (p. 195). One of the important variables in language education is ‘beliefs’. As “beliefs are notoriously

difficult to define and evaluate” (Williams & Burden, p. 56), it has been called as a messy construct (Pajares, 1992). One definition of ‘beliefs’ by Kalaja and Barcelos (2003: 10) is “opinions and ideas that learners (and teachers) have about the task of learning a second/foreign language” (p.10).

Both learners and teachers come to the classroom with a set of beliefs about language learning and teaching. For effective learning outcomes, it is of utmost importance to reveal these beliefs and to investigate to what extent the beliefs of teachers and students correspond.

#### *Teacher Beliefs*

Teachers’ beliefs are “culturally bound, to be formed early in life, and to be resistant to change” and they are also important predictors of how teachers practice in the classroom (Williams & Burden, p. 56). Effective language education rests upon the mental states of teachers (Walberg, 1997). But, beliefs are also difficult to study because they are not directly measurable (Johnson, 1994).

Beliefs develop over time, can be subjective and objective, and allows teachers to make decisions about classroom practices (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). Language teaching is “substantially influenced and even determined by teachers’ underlying thinking” (Clark & Peterson, 1986, p. 255). Therefore, it should be revealed what teachers think about a particular subject in order to better understand classroom.

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### *Learner Beliefs*

An important variable that has been studied over the past 20 years in second language learning is 'learner beliefs' (Dörnyei, 2005; Horwitz, 1999). Until recently the role of grammar instruction has been mainly studied from the teachers' perspectives (Basturkmen, Loewen & Ellis, 2004; Borg, 1999; Ellis, 2006; Phipps & Borg, 2009). Students' beliefs are also not to be ignored as "it is the learners' perceptions and interpretations which have been found to have the greatest influence on achievement" (Williams and Burden, 1997, p.98). Students are among the key stakeholders in teaching and learning process and their beliefs and attitudes can influence the efficacy of language learning. Besides, to have a better classroom portrayal, students' beliefs should be also widely investigated.

Barkhuizen (1998) claims: "if we, as teachers, are aware of where our learners are coming from (how they approach language learning, what they feel about their language learning experiences, and how they act upon these feelings), we will be able to facilitate desired learning outcomes in the classroom" (p. 102). On the other hand Horwitz (1999, p. 557) states, "Understanding learner beliefs about language learning is essential to understanding learner strategies and planning appropriate language instruction". Learner beliefs have been given consideration with the move toward learner-centered approaches to teaching languages. As stated by Block (1992), the shift from "predominantly teacher-directed approaches to greater learning autonomy has brought with it a redefinition of teacher/student roles" (p. 43).

There are some significant variables that are effective in formation of learners' beliefs. Kunt (1997, p. 35) expresses: "learners' beliefs spring from their earlier learning experiences, or they are shaped by their cultural backgrounds and they vary according to which aspect of the language-learning process the learner is considering." Teachers' beliefs and practices can influence students' formation of beliefs. As teachers are generally considered as 'experts' by students, they strongly affect students' conceptions about what language is and how it should be learnt. Elbaum, Berg, and Dodd, (1993) stated that teachers' classroom practices send implicit messages to students about learning. Researchers suggest that correspondences between the beliefs of students and teachers are likely to lead to successful teaching and learning (Wittrock, 1986; Brown, 1990; Fang, 1996; Schulz, 1996). Wittrock is of the opinion that teachers' understanding of their students' beliefs is an important step towards effective teaching. As Paley (1986) puts it: "teaching is a daily search for the learners' point of view (p. 124). However, in some cases the beliefs of teachers and students may not correspond and results in mismatches.

### *The Mismatch Between the Beliefs of Teachers and Students*

The beliefs of learners and teachers in class do not necessarily correspond (Williams and Burden, 1997). The classroom is better understood by revealing not only harmonies but also mismatches between teachers and students (Block, 1996). Johnson suggested that students' misunderstandings of teachers' conceptions are likely to be counterproductive by stating "student learning is enhanced when students accurately perceive teachers' expectations and intentions" (p. 40). Similarly, when teachers accurately comprehend their students' conceptions, favorable and effective classroom climate is likely to emerge.

Schulz (2001) stated that discrepancies in student and teacher belief systems could be harmful to language learning. The mismatches can also affect students' confidence, motivation and willingness to communicate in L2 and result in negative learning outcomes (Horwitz, 1988; McCagar, 1993; Bloom, 2007; Peacock, 2001).

### *Review of Studies in the Literature*

Schachter (1991) stated that the effectiveness of grammar instruction depends on some factors one of which is the learner characteristics. The study of language learners' beliefs was initiated by Horwitz (1988) who developed a 34-item questionnaire "Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory" (BALLI) in order to measure learners' beliefs regarding nature of language learning, difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations. Nunan (1989) found in his study that there are important mismatches between teachers' and students' beliefs about the importance and necessity of some classroom activities such as error correction, pair work, language games, etc. Yang (1992) explored beliefs about language learning among English language students at six Taiwanese universities. It was found that learners' specific beliefs about their own language learning are critical in determining which types of strategies are used.

Barkhuizen (1998) also investigated the extent to which the opinions of teachers and students overlap. The results indicated that students' perceptions did not always correspond with teachers' ones. In another study, Schulz (1996; 2001) investigated teachers' and students' attitudes towards the role of explicit grammar in foreign language learning and error correction. The data from 340 students and 92 teachers revealed that there are significant discrepancies about how to learn and teach foreign languages. The findings showed that many students considered it crucial to be corrected while speaking in class, while few teachers thought like the way students thought. McCagar (1993) also found that there were some discrepancies between the beliefs of teachers and students. The

findings showed that students and teachers have different views on error correction.

Conducting a study in Italy, Hawkey (2006) examined English language teachers' and learners' opinions of communicative language teaching. The findings indicated differences between the perceptions of learners and teachers on the importance of grammar. Loewen et al. (2009) examined the beliefs of L2 learners regarding the role of grammar instruction and error correction. The findings revealed that learners studying English as a second language and those studying as a foreign language had different beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction.

Another study that was conducted in an EFL setting by Ganjabi (2011) revealed that language learners have various beliefs and attitudes towards the role of grammar instruction and the way that grammar should be taught. They have opinions regarding the role of grammar ranged from its use in communication to the only use of grammar in learning English for academic purposes. Besides, the students preferred a range of both mechanical and meaningful drills regarding teaching of grammar. Jean and Simard (2011) investigated the perceptions of language teachers and learners regarding the grammar instruction. The main findings of the study revealed that grammar instruction is considered by both students and teachers as necessary and effective, but not enjoyable.

### Methodology

Considering the scarcity of research studies revealing the grammar beliefs of both teachers and students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings (Phipps & Borg, 2009), the following questions have been investigated to fill in these gaps:

1. What are the thoughts of teachers and students regarding grammar teaching?
2. To what extent do thoughts of teachers and students correspond regarding grammar instruction?

#### Settings

This study took place at a private university's English language preparatory program in southeast Turkey. At the preparatory school every student entering the university had to pass English proficiency exam or spend a semester to a year depending on his or her proficiency. The program was separated in four different skills and there were four levels.

#### Participants

The participants for this study were seventeen non-native instructors and sixty students at the university preparatory school. Instructors differed in their teaching experience and departments they graduated. The number of male and female students were equal. The age of students was between 17 and 24 and they were studying at the English preparatory program. They had to pass proficiency exam or study English up to advanced levels in order to take courses from their

departments. The participants were selected based on convenience and access.

#### Data Collection

Qualitative methodology was used for the purposes of this study. Qualitative research is appropriate when the researcher seeks: to understand, rather to explain; to assume a personal, rather than an impersonal role; and to construct knowledge, rather than discover it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Stake, 1995). Qualitative methodology allows the researchers to understand the beliefs and practices of teachers and students in depth. The data were collected via open-ended questionnaires and in-person interviews. The instructors were given the questionnaires in person and told about the purpose of the research. Some of them chose to respond to it in writing, while others agreed to respond via interviews. The students were also given the open-ended questionnaires and completed it immediately in writing.

#### Data Analysis

The responses of teachers and students were first transcribed and. Both researchers had done a thorough read of the transcripts. Then the responses were coded line-by-line, then paragraph-by-paragraph. Each researcher coded independently then met to discuss their common codes. The responses then were thematically analyzed and common themes were extracted from these responses. From the analyses, the researchers created categories regarding the matches/mismatches between grammar beliefs of teachers and students. The categories were the grammar perceptions from teachers' and learners' perspectives, the necessity of grammar, the methods and techniques to teach grammar, the use of native language, and error correction in grammar classes.

### Results and Discussion

#### *How is grammar perceived by teachers and students?*

The majority of the students defined grammar as "challenging, confusing, and difficult". Despite their negative definitions of grammar, these students generally thought that grammar has a significant place in language learning. One participant student stated: "Although it is a very complicated part of language learning, I think that grammar is essential in language learning". Other participant students shared the opinion that grammar is the combination of rules, a tool to use the language, the essence of language. Besides, some students defined grammar by referring to the differences between their native language and the target language. They stated that their native language Turkish and the target language English have very distinct grammatical features. One student wrote: "When I compare grammatical features of Turkish and English, I come to realize how different they are". There were students who thought that grammar of the target language is very easy to forget, but difficult to deploy in the long-term memory. One student clarified her point

by stating: "If I do not study on grammar for a few weeks, I see that the grammar topics left out of my mind". An interesting finding was that few students thought that grammar was unnecessary and they were against teaching of grammar in isolation. One participant student expressed: "We are learning something which is called grammar and it will not make any difference in our language proficiency."

Teachers' perceptions of grammar centered around three themes. The first and most frequent theme was that some teachers perceive grammar as indispensable and essential in the target language teaching and some teachers specifically depict it as the skeleton of the language. One teacher wrote: "Grammar is the skeleton that puts all the parts of the language together". The second common theme was that teachers considered grammar as an instrument to communicate. They thought that grammar is not an end but a means to achieve to use the target language effectively. The last theme was that some teachers are of the opinion that grammar is a waste of time and should not be taught.

#### *Should grammar be taught?*

The common opinion of the students was that grammar should be taught. Nearly seventy-five percent of the students believed in the significance and essentiality of grammar in second language learning. However, students' opinions differed regarding how much grammar should be taught. Some of the students suggested that the basics of the target language grammar should be taught rather than intensive examination of all the grammar rules. One student's argument was: "When I review the stuff that I learnt in grammar lessons, I find majority of them useless as I do not use them in communication". On the other hand, almost 20% of the students thought that grammar should not be taught at all, but they had different arguments regarding why grammar should not be taught. One interesting suggestion by a student was that grammar should be an elective course and students should not be forced to learn grammar. By doing so, she thought that the motivation and success rate of students would be higher as nobody would be forced to learn grammar. The major argument was that focusing on grammar prevents students from speaking in the target language.

The majority of the teachers believed that grammar should be taught and it is very crucial in language teaching. One participant teacher wrote: "Without grammar, it would be impossible to construct the language building". Some teachers thought that grammar should be taught, but to some extent. They thought that rather than teaching all grammatical rules, their importance and frequency should be considered. In addition, grammar should be taught by integrating with other skills of the language. The minority of the participant teachers thought that grammar should not be taught at all. One teacher stated: "Although I personally believe that grammar is not really critical, the curriculum necessitates us to teach it".

#### *How should grammar be taught?*

Students were asked to write down how they would like to be taught grammar. Nearly half of the participant students preferred to learn grammar deductively. That is, students wanted to study on examples after they were given grammatical rules. The other half are of the opinion that both deductive and inductive instruction should be integrated to the grammar classes whenever and wherever appropriate and necessary. Nearly all the students thought that no detail or elaboration regarding the grammar rules should be presented and more enjoyable and intriguing activities should be integrated into the grammar classes. They also stated that grammar rules should be practiced through speaking activities and grammar should be connected to daily lives of the students.

In contrast, teachers' responses about how grammar should be taught, the most common theme was that it should be taught contextually and made references to daily lives of the students. It was also stated that both inductive and deductive instruction should be integrated into the grammar lessons. Activities that engage students and meet for their needs should be used. Translation should be benefitted and students' native language grammar should be sometimes compared to the target language to enhance understanding of students.

#### *The use of Native Language*

Regarding students' beliefs about the use of native language in the classroom, the findings indicate that the majority of the students were of the opinion that teachers should mostly make use of the target language in grammar teaching. They believed that native language should be only used in order to clarify the points that students did not comprehend and make comparisons between their native language and the target language. One student participant expressed: "In order not to deprive students of critical language input, teachers should mostly make use of the target language in grammar classes, but that does not mean that Turkish should not be used at all". Few students stated that the grammar lessons should be mostly taught in their native language Turkish. By doing so, they thought that the use of native language saves time and there could be more opportunities to practice and communicate in the target language.

On the other hand, teachers had distinct views on the use of native language in grammar lessons. The majority of the participants thought that students' native language should be used at lower language levels. However, teachers differed in the frequency of native language use. Some teachers stated that it should be often used at lower levels while others thought that it should be kept at minimum. The minority of the teachers supported the argument that native language of the students should not be used at all. By doing so, they thought that students will exert more cognitive efforts to understand and much more

time will be allocated for communicative use of the language.

#### *Error Correction*

According to the participant students' responses, there was no conclusive result whether errors or mistakes should be corrected or when and how. Nearly half of the participants thought that errors should be corrected while the other half think vice versa. The students who supported the argument that there should be error correction have different opinions about how and when to correct. Some students wanted to be corrected whenever they make grammatical mistakes. On the other hand, others were of the opinion that there was no need to correct if students are able to convey their messages across. According to them, emphasis on correction may have a demotivating effect on students.

The majority of the participant teachers thought that errors should be corrected on condition that the error or mistake interferes with the transfer of the message. If students are able to convey their messages across, according to the teachers, it was not necessary to correct the mistakes. On the other hand, some teachers were of the opinion that all the mistakes should be corrected no matter they are minor or major mistakes. None of the teachers stated that there should not be error correction.

#### *Discussion*

The findings of this research study suggested that overall both learners and teachers considered grammar to be an essential subject of study in learning English language. Although the learners thought that grammar should be taught deductively with given examples, the teachers' beliefs differed in the way that they preferred grammar to be taught contextually. For both learners and teachers, grammar played a significant role in learning English language. This was similar to previous studies that have been conducted in this area (Incecay & Dollar, 2011; Jean & Simard, 2011; Loewen et al., 2009). The findings of this research also indicated that the learners' beliefs were influenced by their learning structure, which is similar to Kunt's (1997) study. Many of the learners were taught grammar deductively and believed that grammar was boring. Moreover, the findings of this study revealed that grammar instruction is considered by both learners and teachers as necessary and effective, but not enjoyable, which is similar to Jean and Simard (2011)'s findings.

In addition, according to learners, native language should not be employed while teaching English grammar, while the teachers' opinions regarding this differed. In regard to the error correction, majority of the learners and the teachers believed in the use of minimal error correction as long as the students are able to get their message across. Both the learners and teachers valued the importance of expressing one's thoughts effectively not grammatically correct. This is

similar to Loewen et al.'s study. Although many of the findings in this study indicated that learners' and teachers' beliefs regarding grammar teaching and error correction overlap in many areas, there were critical differences that needs to be taken into consideration. The beliefs of learners on the role of native language and target language in teaching of grammar should be taken seriously and considered in planning instruction by teachers.

#### **Implications**

As indicated in this study, the language learning beliefs of teachers and students may not always correspond. In order to lessen these mismatches, some general implications are suggested. These implications are also applicable for grammar teaching which is our main focus in this study. 1-) Teachers should be aware that students' beliefs influence the effectiveness of teaching enterprise. Therefore, they should explain the purposes of activities and why this kind of activities is significant in language learning (Schulz, 1996). 2-) Teachers and students should negotiate their beliefs about language learning. Expectations should be clearly stated, the possible mismatches should be found and tried to be resolved. 3-) Students can be asked to give feedback about their teachers' practices regarding language teaching. By doing so, it would be possible for teachers to what extent teachers' practices and students' expectations converge.

#### **Conclusion**

Cognitive approaches have had an important influence on language teaching methodology by emphasizing the learners' active engagement and processing of the language input (Williams & Burden, 1997). Learners have come to the focal point in language education and their interests and needs have been given much more consideration. An effective teaching is likely to occur when teachers and learners come to a mutual understanding. This study investigated whether or to what extent the beliefs of teachers and students correspond. It is of critical significance to find out students' viewpoints as well as those of teachers in language teaching. As in some studies in the literature (Horwitz, 1988; Nunan, 1989; Barkhuizen, 1998; Schulz, 2001), this study found some discrepancies between beliefs of teachers and students. Assuming that these discrepancies have a determining impact on the success or failure of language instruction, this study investigated the possible mismatches by specifically focusing on grammar instruction.

The results indicated that although the beliefs of teachers and students mostly converge, there are some linguistic points that stakeholders have different beliefs. Teachers and students have similar cognitions regarding the necessity and significance of grammar. The majority of both teachers and students stated that grammar is essential and should be taught. On the other hand, grammar was considered as unnecessary by some teachers and students. Regarding how

grammar should be taught, both teachers and students mostly have similar opinions. However, one frequent theme that was expressed by teachers was not mentioned at all by students: translation. Some teachers believe that translation should be used in grammar classes while no student referred to it.

It is generally thought that language teachers speak in their students' native language, since students demand the use of native language. The findings indicated that the majority of the students were not in favor of frequent use of L1 by their language teachers. They stated that L1 should be used as a last resort rather than depending on it in grammar teaching. Concerning error correction issue, there are no conclusive findings. Both teachers and students have distinct opinions about it, yet they agree on the opinion that correction is unnecessary if students are able to convey their messages across.

As this study attempted to reveal more-in-depth understanding of teachers' and students' beliefs and to what extent they converge or mismatch, the findings of the study is not generalizable. Therefore, a more comprehensive quantitative study could be performed. This study only examined the beliefs of a private university's instructors and students. A comparative study that include both state and private universities may reveal different results.

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