

Understanding the Role of Grammar in Second Language Acquisition: Insights from Middle School Education

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Abstract:

Grammar plays a pivotal role in second language acquisition (SLA), especially during the formative middle school years when students are developing foundational language skills. This abstract explores the intersection of grammar instruction and SLA, highlighting its impact on linguistic proficiency, cognitive development, and communicative competence. Drawing from research and classroom observations, the chapter examines how middle school students internalize grammatical structures to enhance their speaking, writing, reading, and listening skills. It delves into the importance of age-appropriate methods that balance explicit grammar teaching with implicit language exposure, ensuring that students build a robust understanding of syntax, morphology, and semantics. Furthermore, the chapter evaluates the influence of socio-cultural factors on grammar learning, emphasizing the importance of tailored pedagogical approaches that resonate with diverse student populations. By integrating theoretical perspectives and practical insights, this discussion aims to underscore grammar's essential role in equipping students with the tools necessary for effective second language communication.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, Grammar Instruction, Middle School Education, Linguistic Proficiency, Socio-Cultural Factors and Cognitive Development.

1. Introduction

The structure of language is intricate. It covers a wide range of difficult-to-conceive topics. According to [1], language is viewed as a complex system because of its four constituent subsystems: discourse, grammar, lexicon, and semantics. There has been much discussion on the definition of grammar alone. Grammar is a system of guidelines and exclusions that reveal the meaning of the language. An argument concerning descriptive and prescriptive grammar follows from this definition. Having said that, a lot of people might not have understood what grammar was. Language learning and acquisition are two distinct processes. The synergy between language learning and acquisition can provide both internal and exterior systematic views, claims [2]. Adopting a language is different from learning it. Both are crucial for enhancing people's linguistic understanding. According to [3] post, The Value of

Phrase Acquisition, learning a language prevents "us vs. them" mentality and fosters a more culturally aware perspective. Furthermore, [4] defines grammar acquisition as the process by which a person learns a language's principles and norms and is able to apply what they have learned in a communicative setting. Researching grammar acquisition is crucial because it also contributes to stronger grammar instruction in the classroom. However, additional empirical study is needed to support this claim. The role grammar learning is given in figure 1.

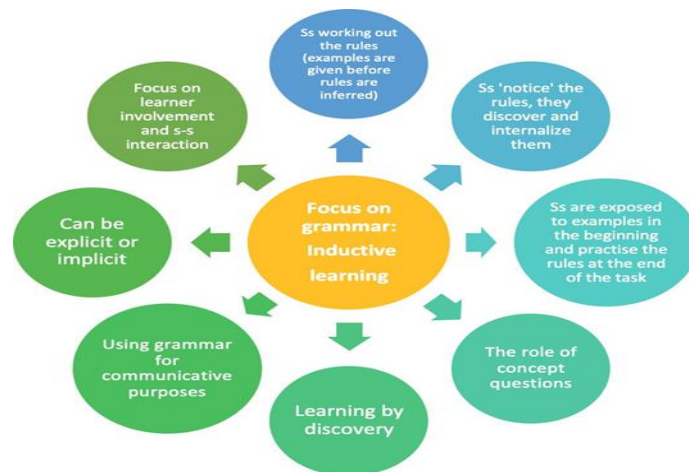


Figure 1: Role of grammar learning in mid-school

Regretfully, the acquisition of grammar has received less attention than other aspects of language acquisition, despite the fact that research on the acquisition of languages has increased since the 1970s [5]. Furthermore, [6] pointed out that studies on grammatical methods have been mostly ignored in the study literature. According to [7], pedagogical grammar is an essential part of learning a second language. The goal of this scoping study is to methodically examine how grammar functions in the instruction and study about second languages. Researchers should perform a scoping review for four reasons, according to [8]. Additionally, the researchers hope to learn more regarding the nature and extent of grammar acquisition, compose a comprehensive systematic review on the subject, create the results of the studies they have gathered, and identify gaps in knowledge that will benefit the language acquisition researchers in future years.

What part does grammar play in the instruction and acquisition of second languages? For many years, a number of language instructors and academics have posed and discussed this question. Grammar's function in a foreign language education is also likened to a swinging device that oscillates between two extremes. Grammar has historically dominated instruction, occupied the majority of the teaching space, and been the only practiced subject in foreign language classes. On the one hand, scholars believe that language education and grammar instruction are very similar. On the other side, there are those who support the general communication approach. With this method, there is only one task in the classroom: discussing a few themes or looking at written material. This method does not involve formal grammar education. In many instances, what has been observed in one area does not translate to the next.

2. Literature Survey

2.1 The Role of Grammar in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Grammar has been a cornerstone of second language acquisition (SLA) for a long time and is often considered the basis for both fluency and accuracy. [8] define grammar as a system of rules governing sentence formation, while [9] distinguishes between prescriptive grammar (rules in grammar books) and descriptive grammar (contextualized language use). Pedagogical grammar, according to [10], points out the teaching of grammar in ways that optimize the learning in classroom contexts. [11], expands on the above by categorizing the grammar into grammatical knowledge, ability, performance and metalinguistic knowledge, with grammatical performance being central to learners ability to use the language effectually.

Despite its significance, the necessity of explicit grammar instruction has been under debate. [12] suggested that learners can acquire grammar naturally through comprehensible input, thus reducing the need for explicit instruction. In this perspective, meaningful activities such as pleasure reading allow learners to "pick up" grammar in a manner similar to first language acquisition. However, SLA theories emphasize that classroom interventions, particularly instructed SLA (ISLA), can expedite learning and provide structure [13]. This is particularly significant in settings where learners do not receive adequate exposure to the target language.

2.2 Problems of Grammar Teaching in EFL Settings

Grammar teaching in many EFL contexts has been challenged both by pedagogical misconceptions and systemic constraints. The initiation of CLT four decades ago created a misconception that grammar was no longer required in language teaching. As [14] indicates, CLT needs to be modified according to specific learning contexts, where the presence or absence of grammar is contingent upon lesson goals. However, [15] points out that most practitioners misinterpreted the "communicative" component of CLT, which led them to believe that communicative competence could be developed without explicit grammar teaching.

The rise of Global Englishes (GE) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has further impacted the role of grammar. It is reported that learners are being encouraged to focus less on native-like accuracy and more on intelligibility [16]. Though this change empowered learners, it also decreased attention to grammar. The reduced interest in grammar is further aggravated by a lack of availability of good quality input and decreased exposure to authentic uses of the language in real-life contexts for EFL learners. [17] states that EFL learners are exposed to the target language for far fewer hours than native-speaking children and therefore have a significant gap in proficiency.

In response to these challenges, research has been conducted in vocabulary acquisition, educational reform, and assessment practices. Nevertheless, according to [18], a systemic

level of issues including teacher education, foreign language policies, and high-stakes examinations have to be addressed first before grammar instruction becomes an effective area for improvement.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

This study targeted 120 middle school students, aged 12–14, studying in a variety of academic tracks. The students were selected from four different classrooms, where each group consisted of 30 students. All groups had the same instructor, and that instructor was also the researcher. The study ran for an academic year that consisted of two semesters.

In the first semester, groups attended a 17-week "General English" class, meeting twice a week for 90 minutes in each session. The focus of the course was foundational English skills in grammar and vocabulary, as well as reading comprehension. In the second semester, the groups moved into an "English for Specific Purposes" course, which they met in once a week, for 90 minutes every time. Both courses included systematic grammar instruction with the purpose of enhancing reading and comprehension abilities.

3.2 Instruments of Measurement

Data was gathered by the combination of tasks and assessments conducted in class. The instruments used in this case included;

Classroom activities: answering reading comprehension questions, paraphrasing sentences that are complex or compound, and translating problematic sentences into their native language

Exams: open questions from the classroom activities used to assess the students' understanding and use of the grammar.

3.3 Procedures for the interventions

The research period covered the entire academic year and aimed at recognizing and remedying comprehension problems resulting from a lack of grammatical consciousness. This process entailed the following pre-class and classroom interventions:

3.3.1 Pre-class Preparation: The students were asked to:

- Read passages assigned and note at least two Wh-questions in each paragraph.
- Check up on the meaning of unknown words in monolingual dictionaries.
- Read grammar sections and paraphrase difficult sentences.
- Do translation exercises contained in each unit.

3.3.2 Classroom Interventions:

During class, comprehension issues raised by students in class were brought to the fore as students reported problems during their pre-class preparation. The teacher dealt with these issues by drawing attention to the grammatical relationships within sentences and across the

text. Other tasks like translation, paraphrasing, and Wh-question exercises were added to elicit further comprehension challenges. The tasks involved complex and compound sentences.

3.3.3 Instructional Focus:

For each of these problems identified, the teacher applied linguistic consciousness-raising techniques to help the student develop strategies to overcome them. The aim was for learners to use grammatical knowledge to enhance their ability to comprehend and to speed up reading.

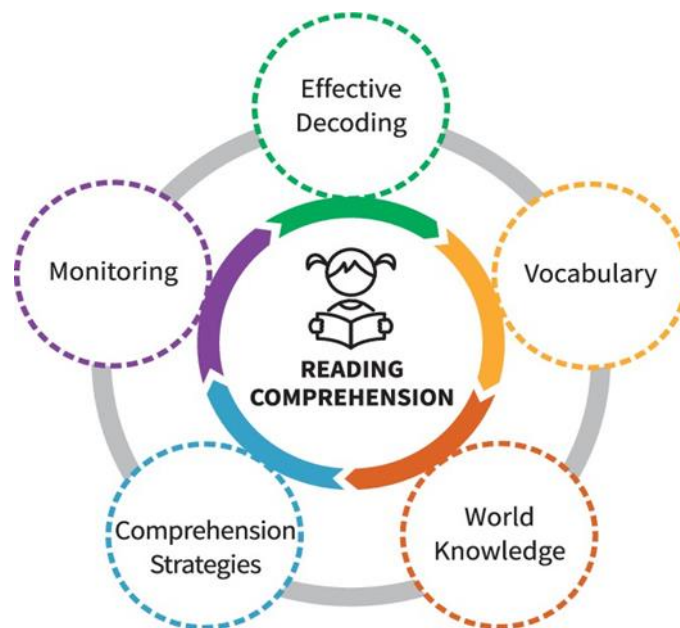


Figure 2: Grammar-Related Comprehension

4. Results and interpretations

4.1 Classification of Grammar-Related Comprehension Challenges

The following comprehension challenges arising from a lack of grammatical awareness as in figure 2 were established:

- Failure to identify and comprehend the different types of phrases and to identify their head nouns.
- Failure to identify different types of clauses and their grammatical functions.
- Failure to recognize the main sentence and the main verb in complex sentences.
- Failure to retrieve omitted parts of sentences (ellipsis).
- Failure to comprehend the roles of conjunctive adverbs.
- Failure to identify pronoun references.
- Failure to fully comprehend verb tenses.
- Failure to identify two-part verbs.

- Difficulty with reversed sentence structures.
- Problem in decoding passive sentences.
- Lack of skills in breaking phrases, chunking, or clustering.
- Misinterpretation of idiomatic expressions and phrasal verbs.
- Lack of knowledge about collocations.
- Generalization or stereotype about similarly spelled or pronounced words.

4.2 Strategies for Overcoming Grammar Problems

The following strategies were used to overcome these problems:

- Encouraging Wh-questions to find semantic and syntactic relations in sentences.
- Pointing out how punctuation marks help to clarify a sentence.
- Reconstruction of missing parts of sentences.
- Identifying independent and dependent clauses in complex-compound sentences.
- Identifying pronoun reference in a text.
- Making sentences shorter by deleting some modifiers and adjective clauses.
- Emphasizing the use of grammatical information from monolingual dictionaries.
- Teaching "phrase breaking" so that students can break down long sentences to better understand.
- Assisting students in determining which is the head noun in phrases.
- Encouraging students to paraphrase complicated sentences using more straightforward grammatical patterns.
- Reorder the reversed sentences into their normal order.
- Explain the role of implicit and explicit conjunctions.
- Recycle and review key grammatical points in reading tasks.
- Ask learners to identify grammatical points in their reading texts so that grammar can be connected to comprehension.
- Course book content is aligned so that grammar sections correspond with key grammatical points in reading passages.

These techniques were incorporated into the classroom practice to increase students' grammatical awareness and enhance their reading speed and comprehension.

5. Discussion

The outcome of this research study reveals that grammatical knowledge is a very potent predictor of better reading comprehension and can be a measure of students' achievement in

second language acquisition. Explicit grammar knowledge not only makes it possible for learners to decode the relationships between sentences but also enables them to comprehend texts more effectively and efficiently (Alavi and Kaivanpanah, 2007). These insights are of critical interest to language teachers who would aim at enhancing students' understanding. They highlight the emphasis put on grammatical education incorporated into teaching strategies. Through methods such as focus on form and explicit grammar teaching, teachers are encouraged to utilize divergent techniques that in themselves promote grammatical consciousness towards the development of efficacious readers.

It argued for an interactive, integrative approach to teaching grammar and how it could be immediately related to reading comprehension. This approach, by raising grammatical knowledge as a tool in unlocking meaning in texts, fostered a more functional and intrinsic motivation in students to read English academic materials. Unlike traditional methods, these methods focus more on providing students with the skills to think and analyze grammatical structure in real reading contexts to apply them. This change permitted them to experience firsthand just how grammar facilitates comprehension of the text, and also satisfaction and confidence in one's reading abilities.

5.1 Limitations of Traditional Models

The most traditional form of grammar teaching in many middle school curricula involves rote and exercise-based teaching that reinforces rules and memorization. Typically, a student would be taught grammar over the span of seven years from middle school through high school: seven years of isolated grammar exercises to complete or identify verb tenses in a rather formulaic, highly structured manner. Neither encourages creativity nor provides an insight into how grammar actually functions within the real-world tasks of comprehension and communication. Furthermore, the recommended textbooks are grammar-oriented and do not weave these rules into meaningful reading contexts. National exams tend to reinforce this structural approach by testing grammar knowledge without encouraging its practical application in language use. Students therefore tend to view grammar as a mechanical system that is unrelated to their real language needs, especially in reading comprehension.

In addition, the absence of recycling grammatical points throughout the curriculum results in quick forgetting of previously acquired knowledge. Students learn grammar rules for isolated exercises and are unable to apply the knowledge when reading or interpreting texts. This disconnection often results in frustration and disengagement because the students cannot see how grammar fits into their broader language development.

5.2 A New Perspective: Grammar as a Comprehension Tool

This paper introduced a fundamentally new way of teaching grammar in which grammar was used as a way to improve reading, rather than as an independent study topic. Students were trained in applying knowledge of grammar actively when dealing with tasks such as identification of sentence structures, relations between phrases and clauses, and complex syntactic forms. These techniques helped overcome barriers to comprehension and aided in the easy navigation of academic texts.

At the end of the study, students showed greater self-satisfaction and intrinsic motivation to read English texts. They no longer viewed grammar as a static set of rules to be memorized but instead recognized its dynamic role in helping them understand meaning. This shift in perspective elevated the importance of grammar to a level equal to, or even surpassing, that of vocabulary acquisition. The ability to apply grammatical knowledge in context fostered a sense of agency in students, giving them the confidence to engage with English academic texts.

5.3 Grammar and Lexis: A Unified Perspective

The findings of this research will align with Sinclair (1991) and Hunston & Francis (1998), who suggest that both grammar and lexis interlink and are interrelated. Willis (1993), on the other hand, believed that grammar and lexis are two systems that collaborate in order to accomplish equivalent linguistic goals. Grammar contains the structural structure of a language, whereas lexis is responsible for providing its meaning patterns. It has, therefore, become important to integrate both in learning for a learner.

From an applied perspective, as Granger (2009) noted, language is more productively considered both "grammaticalized lexis" and "lexicalized grammar." This perspective underlines the need for an integrative approach in second language acquisition, where students learn to see grammar and vocabulary as two sides of the same coin. Such a perspective is supported by this study, where students who worked with grammar and lexis concurrently improved their reading comprehension skills in a very significant way.

5.4 Implications for Middle School Education

This study's results are crucial to middle school language education. Teachers have to design an approach which connects grammar instruction to meaningful reading tasks in order to bridge the gap between these two elements. Curricula and teaching materials have to focus away from rule-based exercises in favor of those that would provide experiences with grammar as a tool in decoding meaning.

It is advisable that such a program should be interactive with explicit grammar instruction provided for reading comprehension tasks. The programs should be aimed at the recycling of grammatical points in successive lessons and with emphasis placed on the practical use of grammar to understand texts. Students will, in turn, be able to remember more of the content if it is put to practice effectively in the real application of language.

In summary, this research demonstrates the potential of teaching grammar as a tool to enhance comprehension. Empowering students to see grammar as part of the reading process means that they are better prepared to deal with complex texts, deepen understanding, and successfully navigate the second language acquisition process.

6. Quantitative Outcomes:

Understanding the Role of Grammar in Second Language Acquisition: Insights from Middle School Education

The findings from this study provide significant insights into the role of grammar in middle

school second language acquisition. The results highlight the following key outcomes:

6.1. Positive Perception of Explicit Grammar Instruction

Generally, middle school students showed positive attitudes toward explicit grammar instruction. The subjects repeatedly recognized the value that grammar instruction, especially instruction in sentence structures (e.g., independent and dependent clauses), brought to the overall process of language learning. They valued the clarification that explicit grammar instruction could bring to sentence analysis in order for them to clearly understand syntactic structures more complexly.

Interestingly, it is found that a large number of students appreciated the impact of grammar on their ability to understand reading. This correlates with other research findings that explicit teaching of sentence dissection-that is, the identification of core parts of a sentence, modifiers, and headwords-increases students' ability to decode meaning and structure. This shows that middle school students feel grammar is relevant and, more importantly, necessary for successful learning.

6.2. Highly Engaged and Motivated

Explicit grammar instruction tends to motivate students better. Once the grammar lesson is introduced within a functional context such as reading comprehension tasks or analysis of sentences, it resulted in a more active learning process by students. Thus, this further mastery of grammatical knowledge also brought about better feelings of accomplishment and further increases their confidence to access academic texts.

This assisted in teaching grammar in context by doing activities such as sentence-level structures identification and applying the rules of grammar to reading tasks, thereby promoting the notion of grammar as a tool for understanding rather than a collection of disconnected rules. This is especially important in middle school, where if the method of instruction does not seem to be applicable to the real world, the students lose interest.

6.3. Practical Application and Skill Development

The study established that application of grammatical knowledge had resulted in both the students reading comprehension improving but also an increase in students' ability to construct grammatically correct sentences. Exercises with dependent clauses and the headword-modifier identification came next as being the most precious, according to the subjects.

More evidence revealed that the growth of knowledge about grammar was built simultaneously with vocabularies. The students were not reporting this deficiency of vocabularies as a significant obstacle. Nevertheless, they did attest that teaching of grammar had provided them with the impression of what to do with the vocabularies that they already understood. It implies that what the students had learnt in grammar had influence the vocabularies students use during learning, and in line with research reported before.

6.4. General Changes in Attitudes toward Grammar

Probably the most significant change students showed was their perception of grammar. Instead of being a static system of rules, they changed it to a dynamic and functional tool that serves for comprehension and communication. In linking grammar instruction to practical tasks like reading comprehension, students became even more appreciative of what grammar can do for learning a language.

This shift was particularly notable with students who had previously underperformed in grammar activities. It was found that these students' comprehension skills became improved along with their built-in motivation to engage more with the English texts used in the classroom.

6.5. Implications for Practice

The findings highlight the role of explicit grammar instruction in the middle school second language curricula. Teaching methods which give emphasis to sentence structure analysis, context-based grammar exercises, and real-world applications will significantly enhance student outcomes. Teachers are encouraged to create lessons that integrate grammar with other language skills, including reading and writing, as a way of providing more holistic language use for their students.

The study also indicates that the knowledge of grammar has to be consolidated through a number of lessons. Meaningful contexts ensure that the grammar points recycle consistently and therefore students are able to remember and apply their knowledge after some time, rather than forgetting them after isolated exercises. The results of this study show that the central role of grammar in second language acquisition for middle school students. When a positive attitude toward grammar is developed and its utility is made apparent, the educator will empower the learner to face the journey of language learning with confidence and competence. Explicit grammar instruction, delivered in an engaging and contextually meaningful way, can have a huge impact on both comprehension and motivation in young learners.

Figure 3 Data Distribution of Category-One Respondents regarding Grammar Teaching (n = 20) depicts the the Category-One participants, who had 20 participants, stressed strong support for explicit grammar instruction. For instance, questions that asked whether grammar teaching helps in understanding sentences, such as independent clauses and dependent clauses (Q1, Q7, and Q10), showed unanimous agreement from all respondents. Further, between 85% and 95% of the respondents agreed that explicit grammar teaching promotes thinking critically about sentence structures (Q3, Q6, and Q9). Most importantly, 80% of them were against the view that grammar is not necessary for communication (Q2), and so re-affirmed their belief in its utility.

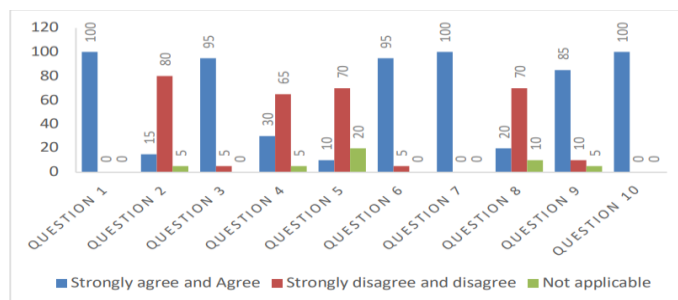


Figure 3: Data Distribution of Category-One Respondents regarding Grammar Teaching (n = 20)

What was remarkable is when asked if the instructor should have taught grammar using only English (Q8), respondents voted massively in favor of the inclusion of their mother tongue, as if bilingual explanations had played a crucial role in the success of their learning. Answers to Q4, concerning how hard or easy it was to learn grammar, revealed that most participants were not of the opinion that grammar was particularly hard, against earlier studies, which may often label grammar as very difficult for EFL learners. In general, the result indicates a clear demand for explicit grammar instruction and seems to point out that this group of participants had gained a positive view of grammar due to engaging approaches in teaching.

Figure 4 Distribution of Category Two Respondents on Teaching Grammar (n = 63) depicts the results of Category-Two participants, who were 63 students in an academic English reading course, also show a positive attitude toward explicit grammar instruction. Most participants agreed that teaching sentence structures, such as independent clauses, dependent clauses, and phrases, is useful (Q1, Q2, and Q7). The response of questions to vocabulary and sentence-level reading exercises (Q4, Q5, and Q6) reflects the fact that participants perceived value in grammar instruction and can make the appropriate use of such grammar in reading tasks. Also, 84.4% found exercises dissecting elements of a sentence, for instance, the core part of the sentence, the headword, and modifiers as highly useful (Q7).

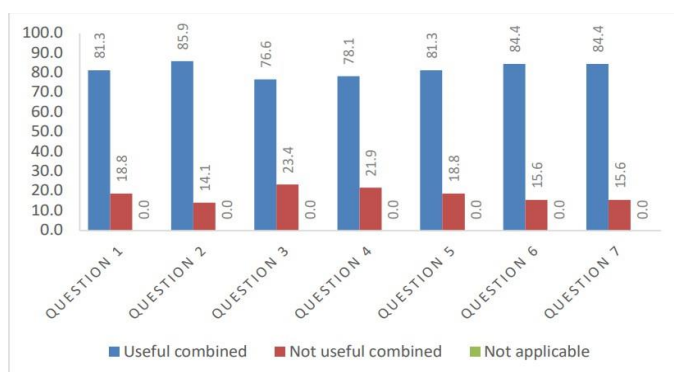


Figure 4: Distribution of Category Two Respondents on Teaching Grammar (n = 63)

There was little disagreement or disagreement with the utility of grammar instruction across all questions and no responses marked as "Not Applicable." Such findings suggest that participants in the academic reading course were aware of the practical advantages of grammar instruction to comprehend sentences, especially the relevance of grammar

instruction in an academic context. In addition to Category-One participants, responses reflect a general appreciation of grammar instruction, and therefore, its critical role in reading comprehension and sentence-level proficiency. Here are the questions involved in the data distribution for both Category-One and Category-Two participants:

Table 1: Category-One Participants (n = 20)

1. Q1: How useful is explicit grammar instruction focusing on sentence structure (e.g., independent vs. dependent clauses)?
2. Q2: Do you think grammar is unnecessary for communication?
3. Q3: Does explicit grammar instruction help you think critically about sentence structures?
4. Q4: Do you find English grammar learning difficult?
5. Q5: Is vocabulary knowledge a prerequisite to your grammar knowledge?
6. Q6: Does explicit grammar instruction help you understand sentence structures better?
7. Q7: How useful is grammar instruction focusing on sentence structures in your learning?
8. Q8: Should the instructor use only English while explaining grammar in class?
9. Q9: Does the use of your first language (L1) in the grammar lessons help you in understanding grammar?
10. Q10: Does focusing on sentence structure help improve your grammar understanding?

Table 2: Category-Two Participants (n = 63)

1. Q1: How useful is grammar instruction focusing on types of sentences (e.g., independent clauses, dependent clauses)?
2. Q2: How useful is grammar instruction focusing on types of dependent clauses?
3. Q3: How useful is grammar instruction focusing on phrases in the sentence?
4. Q4: How useful is grammar instruction for reading at the sentence level?
5. Q5: How useful is vocabulary knowledge for reading comprehension at the sentence level?
6. Q6: How useful is grammar instruction for understanding sentences in reading comprehension tasks?
7. Q7: How useful is dissection of sentence elements (e.g., core parts, headwords, modifiers) for improving sentence-level reading comprehension?

These table 1 and 2 questions are designed to assess the participants' views on the usefulness and impact of grammar instruction, specifically focusing on sentence structures and their relevance to reading comprehension.

7. Conclusion

The study underlines the role of grammar teaching in the process of second language acquisition, especially within middle school education. Participants in both categories were very positive about explicit grammar teaching, indicating its significance for improving reading comprehension and sentence-level proficiency. This result applies to smaller and larger groups of participants, thus illustrating that grammar instruction is a universal necessity for language learning.

For Category-One participants ($n = 20$), explicit grammar instruction on sentence structures, such as independent and dependent clauses, proved to be very helpful. Most students appreciated how grammar helped them understand the construction of sentences and how it enhanced their ability to critically analyze texts. Most importantly, their responses showed that bilingual explanations were preferred by the students, which suggests that having the students' L1 included in grammar lessons will greatly enhance their understanding. Moreover, the students found that grammar posed no more difficulty than a language learning method if it was presented through appropriate, interactive, contextual, and real-life context and settings. Category Two students ($n = 63$) of an academic English reading course reported a very positive attitude toward grammar instruction, especially on the development of reading comprehension. The learners pointed out the importance of acquiring sentence-level structures and their interrelation with one another. The most valuable activities were those on the dissection of sentences, especially when it came to the core parts, headwords, and modifiers. To this student, grammar is simply one heck of an effective way into reading academic texts. So is found that grammar should not be regarded as a set of formulas but as a dynamic entity which can help towards better understanding and effective communication. Explicit grammar teaching along with reading is the best way through which the teacher can help SL learners toward achieving higher language awareness, intrinsic interest, and general academic achievement. The outcomes suggest more context-specific and interactive grammar teaching that more appropriately responds to the language need of the students in real life situations.

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