

EFL Learners Attitudes towards Grammar Teaching Strategies

*** Takroumbalt Mohammed Ameziane**

University of Tamanghasset (Algeria).

Lab of language practices and their extension in the African Sahel countries

mohammedamezianetakroumbalt@gmail.com

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Abstract:

Multiple methods and methodologies are adopted in teaching grammar and in different cycles and universities. Accordingly, we conducted a linguistic investigation at the university level, specifically about EFL students' attitudes towards grammar teaching strategies in an Algerian university, the university of tamanrasset. Second year students were the case study. This study aims at examining students' tendencies and their attitudes towards the educational methodologies adopted by their teachers in teaching grammar rules. We supplied our investigatory study by presenting a questionnaire to students. An interview was also conducted with some university teachers. Based on the analysis of the results of the questionnaire, we found that students' choices and tendencies towards the methodology differ from students to others. As for the side of teachers, it has been shown to us that teaching methodology differs from one teacher to another.

Keywords: Grammar Strategies, EFL Students, Attitudes and Tendencies, Tertiary



1. Introduction

Grammar has played a significant role in the history of second and foreign language teaching and learning (Purpura, 2004), and it is one of the difficult issues that both, teachers and learners have faced. Learners, in learning any language, need to acquire the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Grammar as a sub-skill is as important as the other language skills and without grammar, speech is meaningless. Furthermore, grammar learning enables learners to produce and write correct and

* Takroumbalt Mohammed Ameziane. Email. mohammedamezianetakroumbalt@gmail.com

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well-formed sentences because without a good acquisition of grammar, learners' language development will be hardly constrained.

In the same line of thought, such a perspective has eventually nurtured contentious debate over how to better approach instructional grammar methodologies and audit classroom practices. In second/foreign language grammar learning, however, the challenge is much greater. In fact, the study of grammar is a highly complicated undertaking encompassing much more than the study of the conventional linguistic rules but adhering to the intricate linguistic mechanisms governing the language system and the set of cognitive and metacognitive processes necessary for internalizing, processing, and manipulating such knowledge for ulterior recall and use. Hence, awareness and understanding of the different language structures is by far a prerequisite to promoting learners' grammar achievement. According to Jean and Simard (2011), grammar learning helps to improve students' language accuracy, which leads to an effective communication. Teaching grammar effectively is still a challenge facing different educational institutions. Although English is taught in a traditional way in many studies (Le Van Canh & Barnard, 2009), EFL students are still facing quite a lot of troubles with grammatical knowledge. Furthermore, teaching grammar used to be reduced its role in the communicative approach, where EFL students are pushed to communicate without paying much attention to grammatical mistakes.

Previous studies on students' and teachers' attitudes towards grammar instruction in the context of language learning suggest a disparity between students and teachers (Brindley, 1984; Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Leki, 1995; Spratt, 1999). While students prefer formal and explicit grammar instruction, teachers prefer communicative activities with less conscious focus on grammar. However, studies related to grammar teaching have mostly paid their attention to EFL teachers' attitudes; few have been conducted to investigate learners' attitudes towards such grammar classrooms.

At the university of Tamanrasset, the grammar module is taught in the English department only in the first and second years of licence. The time allotted is three hours per week, divided in two separated sessions. The general guidelines of the grammar syllabus is predetermined by the ministry of higher education, and teachers are required to develop it and achieve all its units after two semesters of studies. In

this respect, it was noticed that even though the majority of EFL students in this English department have been studying the English language for seven years and they are introduced to the grammar module since the first semester at the university, most of them still have difficulties to use their grammatical knowledge effectively when using the target language in real communicative contexts. In other words, they may know the grammar rules perfectly but they fail to use them when communicating.

Furthermore, current classroom practices overshadow the functional aspect of grammar, as noticed in the teacher-student interaction. The teacher must engage the students in a discovery learning experience, eliciting questions so the learner can ultimately discover the rule inductively. The current teaching methods have shown remarkable inadequacies in creating a consistent grammar teaching framework.

To use English language accurately, EFL students in the aforementioned department receive the needed grammatical knowledge during two years of study. Yet, teachers usually complained about their students' grammatical errors committed in writing and speaking. What is more, students in general, may know perfectly the grammatical rules but they often fail to put them in effective use.

Our aim of conducting this study is to investigate EFL students' attitudes towards grammar learning and teaching strategies at the university, and to suggest some recommendations to shift EFL students' negative attitudes toward those strategies. Firstly, the study attempts to shed light on the strategies that EFL university teachers employ to teach grammar. Secondly, it aims investigating the attitudes EFL learners have toward those strategies.

This study deals with an investigation into EFL learners' attitudes toward grammar teaching strategies. For the sake of investigating this subject of study, two research questions govern this study:

Q1. What are the teaching strategies that EFL teachers apply to teach grammar?

Q2. Do the EFL students have positive or negative attitudes toward grammar teaching strategies?

The present study embraces the mixed methods research that merges qualitative and quantitative research. First, it uses a questionnaire that is distributed to second year

EFL students at the University of Tamanghasset. Second, an interview is conducted with some second year EFL teachers of the same university to gather more data about their attitudes toward the strategies used by the teachers to teach grammar.

2. Literature review:

Teaching grammar is a crucial component of English language Teaching (ELT), because grammar is a tool for creating meaningful sentences. Language and grammar are interrelated as the latter describes the rules that govern language. As Musumeci (1996, p.1) states: “language does not exist without grammar, because all languages are characterized by the grammar components: phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics or meaning”. In this context, Larsen Freeman (2001) claims that many people used to associate the term ‘grammar’ with the way language is used. The reason why grammar is misunderstood is that it is ambiguous. This means that the term ‘grammar’ is vague; this misunderstanding leads to different interpretations. Thus, grammar is defined in a number of ways according to different authors.

Grammar means very different things to different people; therefore, there is no one and only way to define it. There are different kinds of grammars out there but in this research the focus is on its function and importance in language learning and teaching. Thornbury (2004, p.13) describes grammar as: “a description of the rules for forming sentences, including an account of the meanings that these forms convey”. Harmer (1987) sees that grammar of language refers to the plural of the words, negation and word order for example when we make questions or join two clauses.

There are several types of grammar; ‘prescriptive grammar’ is regarded as a conventional method since it focuses on how the English language should be constructed and used, and how functions should be carried out. Accessibility for formal spoken and written English is offered by prescriptive grammar. ‘Descriptive grammar’ is a study of a language’s rules and structure as they apply to how speakers of both standard and nonstandard varieties use it on a daily basis. According to Greenbaum and Quirk (1990), descriptive grammar explains the language’s structure as well as the syntactic rules that control sentence and phrase

development. 'Formal grammar' emphasizes on the rules and the structures of language whereas 'functional grammar' stresses on communication.

Grammar has always held a central role in EFL classrooms but the methods of teaching have differentiated significantly. Hall (2011) suggests that the change in teaching methods reflect the spirit of the times and the new ideas, such as social values and interests in linguistics. In the EFL classroom, teachers may employ numerous grammar teaching strategies, namely, explicit and implicit grammar instruction ; the deductive approach in teaching grammar; the inductive approach in teaching grammar; and, the eclectic approach in teaching grammar.

Grammar has been a subject of many discussions in language teaching and learning. Therefore, differences in attitudes to the role of grammar lead to different methods used. In this context, Thornbury (1999) claims: "In fact, no other issue has so preoccupied theorists and practitioners as the grammar debate, and the history of language teaching is essentially the history of the claims and counterclaims for and against the teaching of grammar" (p. 14).

That is to say that teaching grammar is regarded from two different points of view; there are those who see grammar as a significant component to learn another language, while the others argue that is not important and useless. Accordingly, Ur (1988) claims that "there is no doubt that a knowledge -implicit or explicit- of grammatical rules is essential for the mastery of a language" (p. 4).

It is worth mentioning that with the emergence of the communicative approach to language teaching and learning, the emphasis on grammar has been changed as the goal of communication argued that the teaching of grammar rules alone could not help learners to communicate. In this context, Skehan (1998) claims that the focus on producing grammatically correct sentences makes the learners unable to use language. In spite of all these different points of view, grammar is still an essential part in the process of language teaching and learning. In fact, learners will be motivated to learn and acquire a language if they have a good attitude toward the learning process. In this context, Montano and Kasprzyk (2008) point out that:

Attitude is determined by the individual's beliefs about outcomes or attributes of performing the behavior

(behavioral beliefs), weighted by evaluations of those outcomes or attributes. Thus, a person who holds strong beliefs that positively valued outcomes will result from performing the behavior will have a positive attitude toward the behavior. Conversely, a person who holds strong beliefs that negatively valued outcomes will result from the behavior will have a negative attitude (p.71).

The quotation above implies that an attitude refers to a belief and a person who has a positive attitude will bring about positive results which are not the case if that person has negative attitudes, i.e. He will bring about negative results.

3. The research design and procedure

Research design is the set of research techniques and methods that a researcher uses to carry out a study. It is a way for researchers to make sure they are using the right research methods for the right topic and setting up their studies to be successful. The design of a study will dictate which tools are used and how they are used. The mixed-method approach is most appropriate for the present research as it ensures valid and reliable results, using both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. A comparison of the results would allow us to arrive at conclusions. The researcher opted for such a design to demonstrate the relationship between the variables. The present research is conducted at the University of Tamanghasset, at the department of the English language exactly with second year EFL students and teachers.

4. The participants and research informants

In order to collect reliable data about the attitudes of EFL learners toward the ways of teaching grammar at the department of English, 26 questionnaires were administered to 26 EFL students from the University of Tamanghasset, their ages range from 19 to 41 years old, males and females; they studied English for 09 years since the first year of the middle school. The researcher also conducted an interview with EFL teachers. The interview was addressed to two teachers from the University of Tamanghasset. The department of English comprises only five permanent teachers, and only two teachers are attributed to teach grammar to L1 and L2 classes. They were selected purposively.

5. Data collection instruments

In order to conduct this study, the researcher opted for both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The mixed method is adopted in this research work because qualitative method is more suitable to this research in order to collect the necessary and appropriate data from the questionnaire and the interview to answer the research questions. In addition, quantitative data complement and support qualitative findings. Quantitative data offer general trends, while qualitative data provide contextual insights or deeper explanations of those trends, this gives the research study a kind of scientific credibility.

The questionnaire that is used for this study is addressed to second year EFL students at the University of Tamanghasset. It includes both close-ended questions and open-ended questions. It contains 20 questions and it is divided into three sections which are as follow: students' age and gender, their attitude and their skill in English grammar, and their attitudes toward grammar teaching strategies.

The second research tool employed in this study is the interview. Interviews are beneficial in that they can be conducted face-to-face, over the phone, or online using tools like e-mail, Skype, and similar services. The interview that is used for this study is addressed to second year EFL grammar teachers at the University of Tamanghasset. It consists of 8 questions and they are arranged in order to find out teachers' strategies used for teaching English grammar. The first question aims at knowing whether the teachers ignore their learners' grammar mistakes when talking or not, the second question aims to see if the teachers stop their learners to repeat what have just said in a corrected version if they make grammatical mistake when talking to raise their awareness about that mistake, concerning the third question, the purpose behind asking this question is to know teachers' opinion about the best way of teaching grammar; implicitly or explicitly, for the fourth question, it had been asked to know that grammar should be taught either explicitly or implicitly depending on the confidence of the teacher in explaining about the grammar point, or depending on the difficulty of the grammar point, for the fifth question, the purpose behind asking this question is to know teachers' opinion about the best way of teaching grammar; inductively or deductively, the aim of the sixth question is to know teachers' opinion whether grammar is best taught inductively or deductively

depending on the grammar point, on the teachers' preference, or on the students' preferences, the seventh question aims at knowing the teachers' opinions about teaching grammar only when a particular grammar point appears in the material or communication (in context), the last question had been asked to know if the teachers correct their learners' grammatical errors in class unless these errors interfere with comprehensibility or not.

The interviews were carried out with two university English teachers. The interviews were performed in English. All the questions related to the strategies that are used by teachers to teach grammar. Based on theory, the questions were already planned; comparison of responses is feasible and easy; less skills are required especially for beginning researchers and results can be generalized qualitatively.

6. Data analysis procedures

The mixed method adopted in the data collection in which both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools were used determines the type of analysis used in this study. The findings from each tool are compared with those derived from another through triangulation. The gathered data is analyzed according to qualitative and quantitative data from the interview protocol and the students' questionnaire. The results from these instruments are triangulated to seek validity. The findings will be compared to check convergence. Participants received questionnaires for which the response rate is considered. The data collected are analyzed using the manual percentage and through Google docs, partly by using descriptive Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) program to calculate frequency with the median, the mean and the mode.

The data from the teachers' interview and students' questionnaire are collected nearly and classified into categories according to the research questions and the hypothesis. The data are analyzed with reference to independent variables like age, teaching experience and grammar teaching/learning experiences. First, the collected data are screened, cleaned of irrelevances. Then, they are organized into categories and sections. After that, they are analyzed according to the concurrent mixed method procedure. The students' questionnaire quantitative data are analyzed separately and so are the data collected from the interview. After that, the findings are compared

and triangulated for convergence. Finally, all the data results are interpreted (Creswell, 2012).

7. Findings and data analysis

As aforementioned, the main objective of this study is to investigate EFL students' attitudes towards grammar learning and teaching strategies at the university, and to suggest some recommendations to shift EFL students' negative attitudes toward those strategies. Furthermore, to look for ways of promoting the teaching of grammar in the Algerian university. To achieve this objective, different research tools were employed.

7.1. Students' questionnaire analysis and interpretation

As aforementioned, twenty six (26) questionnaires were distributed to second year EFL students. All of them are answered by the students but some of them lacked the answer. The questionnaire included 20 questions under 3 rubrics. This questionnaire aimed at knowing the students' attitudes into the ways of teaching grammar used by their teachers.

Students were asked about the importance of English grammar.

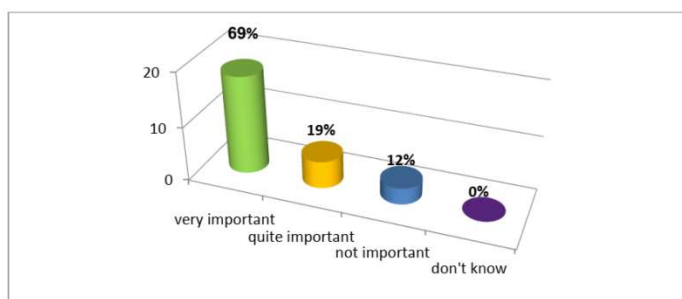


Diagram 01: Students' opinion about the importance of English grammar

This diagram shows that (69%) of the participants claim that English grammar is very important in language learning. (19%) of them see that English grammar is quite important while only (12%) of them think it is not important to learn grammar

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when learning language. And no one has answered that he/she doesn't know that English grammar is important or not.

The following diagram illustrates students' answers about how good they consider their skills in English grammar.

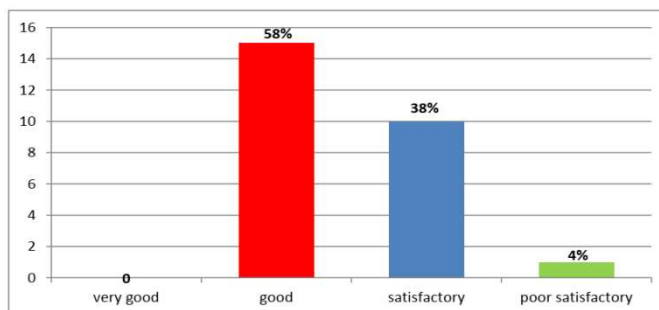


Diagram 02: How good are students' skills in English Grammar

The diagram indicates that (58%) of the respondents claim that their level in English grammar is good; (38%) of them see that it is satisfactory. And only (4%) believe that their level is poor satisfactory in English grammar. No one has answered that his/ her level in English grammar is very good.

The diagram below summarises students' answers about their teachers' grammar teaching strategy whether it is enjoyable, understandable, and appreciated.

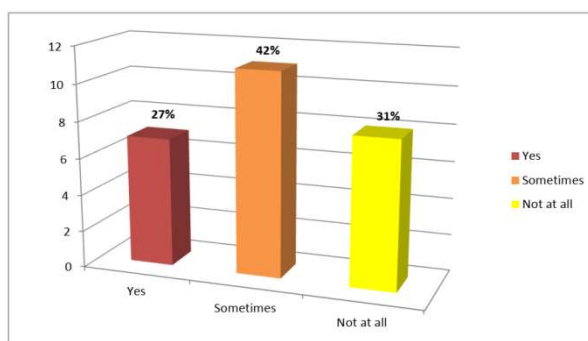


Diagram 03: Students' attitudes toward their teachers' grammar teaching strategies

The majority of the participants have negative attitude toward the strategy of grammar teaching used by their teachers; (42%) of the respondents see that it is not always enjoyable, understandable and appreciated, and (31%) of them claim that it is not enjoyable, understandable and appreciated at all. While only (27%) of the participants see that their teachers' grammar teaching strategies are enjoyable, understandable and appreciated.

The pie chart shows that the majority of the participants (69%) disagree with the strategy when their teacher ignores their grammatical mistakes when talking. Only (31%) of them agree with this strategy in order to be more confident and more fluent.

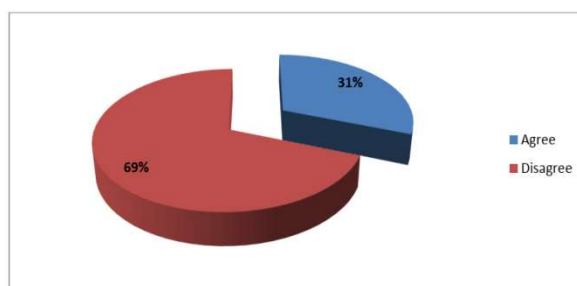


Diagram 04: Students' attitude when the teacher ignores their grammatical mistakes when talking to be more confident and more fluent

We also notice that the majority of the respondents (73%) agree with the strategy of grammar teaching when their teacher stops them when making grammatical mistakes when talking to repeat what they have just said in a corrected version to indirectly raise their awareness about the mistakes; while only (27%) did not agree with this strategy.

Concerning teaching grammar explicitly, students answered:

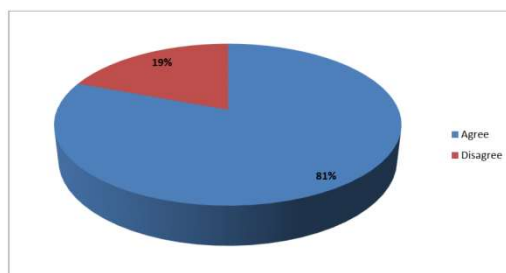


Diagram 05: Students' opinion about the strategy of teaching grammar explicitly

The diagram below illustrates students' answers about teaching grammar implicitly:

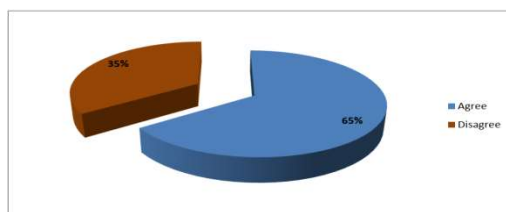


Diagram 06: Students' opinion about the strategy of teaching grammar implicitly

From the above result, we notice that the great number of the participants (65%) see that grammar should be taught implicitly in which the grammar rules should not be pointed out, but they should be understood implicitly through various forms of exposure. On the other side, (35%) of the respondents disagree with this prospect.

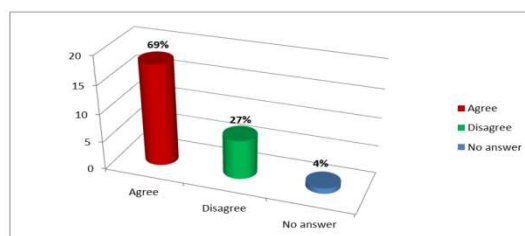


Diagram 07: Students' attitude toward the strategy of teaching grammar inductively

From the above diagram, it is clear that (69%) of the participants think that grammar is best taught inductively when the students are given the chance to examine many examples to find out the rule and only (27%) of them answered that they are against this way of teaching grammar. (4%) of the respondents did not answer this question.

As for the last question, the students were given the chance to provide their suggestions about the strategies of teaching grammar they see they are suitable to be applied by their teachers. They say that they need to be given more practices about grammar points before going on to another point, and they need to simplify things as much as possible. One of them sees that the grammar lesson should be entertaining and enjoyable. Another suggested way of teaching grammar is that the teacher should repeat the grammar rules each time across the lesson since not all students have a good a memory to remember the rules. Some of the students suggest that the teacher of grammar should adopt a strategy of teaching grammar that enable the student to be accurate and fluent at the same time.

Based on the results, the majority of the respondents (69.23%) think that grammar is very important. Commonly, being it is considered as the most significant pillar of any language. This investigation illustrates that (69.23%) of the respondents disagree with the fact that when they make grammatical mistakes when talking, their teacher should ignore them so that they can be more confident and more fluent. Some of their main reason behind this is that, dealing with uncorrected grammatical mistakes or repeating them paying a scant attention to the correction will not make progress in learning.

Pertaining to the ninth question, which is related to “teaching grammar explicitly”. So that the rule should be clearly stated, and pointed out to students. The results show that the vast majority (80.76%) of participants agrees with the aforementioned concept since teaching grammar explicitly makes it easier to demonstrate the grammatical point and make use of it appropriately in a given context.

Conversely, in the tenth question that is about “teaching grammar implicitly” we can see that (65.38%) of learners agree with that. And support the manner of how grammar rules should not be pointed out, but they should be understood implicitly through various forms of exposure. Some stated that this might have positive effect as a kind of learning autonomy.

According to the thirteenth question, which is concerned with ‘Grammar is best taught inductively’. i.e. students examining many examples to find out patterns. It is shown that (69.23%) do agree with this strategy. On the other side it is (26.92%) of the participant who disagree.

7.2. Teachers’ interview analysis and interpretation

As mentioned before, the researcher used the structured interview in this research in order to identify the strategies of teaching grammar that are employed by teachers. The interview was delivered to two teachers of grammar. They were given the same questions. The researcher asked some questions related to the strategies of teaching grammar used by teachers.

Concerning the first and the second questions, teacher 1 said that she does not ignore the students’ grammatical mistakes. She corrects them but without embarrassing them, while teacher 2 said that he corrects only certain errors which are usually decided on grounds of the lesson’s objectives. This interprets that the teachers do not ignore students’ grammar mistakes in order to be more accurate. Although they differ in the strategy, both teachers tend to correct mistakes, teacher 2 focuses on mistakes with accordance to the course’s aims.

Teacher 1 said that grammar should be taught implicitly or explicitly depending on the confidence of the teacher in explaining about the grammar point and on the difficulty of the grammar point. This means that grammar teachers sometimes need to state and point out the grammar rule clearly to students, and sometimes the grammar rule should be understood implicitly through various forms of exposure. It depends on the ability of the teacher in explaining and the difficulty of the grammar point. Whereas, teacher 2 did not answer the question, the researcher noticed that she was confused.

The two teachers stated that grammar should be taught inductively and deductively. Using these two types depends on a number of factors and characteristics, including the nature of language being taught, the student’s attainment level. The teachers also see that grammar is better to be taught as a whole module, and not only when a grammar point appears in the material or context.

Teachers agree that the mistakes and errors should be spot-fixed for the sake of comprehension as it is recommended by experts who believe that correcting student's grammatical mistakes drew his/ her attention at that instant time.

8. Results and Discussion

Generally speaking the data collected from the research demonstrate that students share a very positive attitude towards grammar knowledge and grammar instruction in the EFL classroom. A vast majority think that knowing grammar is essential to the mastery of the foreign language and it does not only serve to succeed in various tests.

As regards to teachers' interview analysis, it is demonstrated that the most employed grammar teaching strategies by teachers are the explicit-deductive method and the implicit inductive method; however, they seem to favor the implicit-inductive method over the explicit-deductive, these theories and models of grammar instructions engage with the literature reviewed earlier. This confirms the result of the teachers' answer in the interview in which they state that the strategies of teaching grammar they used to apply are explicit-deductive method and the implicit-inductive method. This result confirms the first and the second hypotheses.

The discussion of the findings of students' questionnaire provided an answer to the research questions suggested in the introduction. The data obtained from the questionnaire show that the students differ in their answers concerning their attitudes toward the strategies of teaching grammar used by their teachers. The majority of the respondents have a positive attitude toward grammar teaching strategies that are used by their teachers even though there are some others who have negative attitudes toward these strategies and they suggest other ways of teaching grammar. This means that the third hypothesis is confirmed; the EFL students have positive attitudes toward grammar teaching strategies.

Although the present study is limited to second year EFL students in one university, which is the University of Tamanghasset, the findings can be generalized to a wider context, as evidenced by their conformity with the findings of other studies cited in the review of relevant literature.

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Although the research findings showed that the second year EFL learners have different attitudes toward grammar teaching strategies, some recommendations and suggestions are provided to the teachers and learners:

First of all, making students aware of the importance of grammar for successful foreign language learning; they need to be taught grammar through various methodologies and approaches to cater to their individual styles of learning, and educators should consider students' attitudes and perceptions when making decisions about how to teach grammar.

Additionally, The Algerian Curriculum and material developers should show an understanding of learners' and teachers' difficulties, and provide sufficient guidance and help in the curriculum document and the teachers' book showing how the potential difficulties could be addressed in planning their classroom activities. Teachers may be given examples of mediating tasks, which would mitigate the difficulties.

Teachers are required to find out the appropriate methods in teaching grammar, to be eclectic in using these methods, and to strive hard to adapt these methods to their teaching and learning contexts in order to help their students to have a high level of grammatical attainment.

According to Brown (2002, p.10), "It has been realised that there never was and probably never will be a method for all". However, researchers and educators advocated number of grammar teaching methodologies based on their teaching experiences or on empirical research findings, that may fit to some extent the situation under study.

Teaching grammar in context is of a paramount importance. In this respect, Harmer (1991) states that " Students need to get an idea of how the new language is used by native speakers and the best way of doing this is to present language in context" (p. 57).

Another crucial criterion is teaching grammar communicatively. The focus should be on the meaning. Therefore, any alternative grammar teaching method must take account of both form and meaning.

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Teachers must benefit from regular and specific training programs in the very recent grammar teaching approaches in order to update their knowledge and to meet their students' needs and expectations.

In fact, the syllabus in language teaching is of paramount importance, it does not only delimit the grammar units that should be studied but also sets the objectives to be achieved. Consequently, teachers are asked to be more flexible in following the grammar syllabus.

Concerning the students' roles and needs, the learner is an integral part in the EFL classroom. Without the learner's involvement and engagement, any teacher's effort to boost their student's language competences will be futile. Hence, EFL learners are required to take part in remedying the situation, overcoming the current difficulties, and promoting the academic language studies. In the same respect, students have to be highly motivated intrinsically and extrinsically. Besides, teachers have to foster and enhance students' autonomy inside and outside the EFL classroom.

Finally, this study aims at investigating EFL learners' attitudes toward grammar teaching strategies at the university; however, more investigations and studies concerning this issue under other different parts of the issue or other conditions and circumstances is needed for better improvement in the field of grammar teaching in Algerian universities and other EFL contexts in the world.

9. Conclusion

To sum up, we can say that the results obtained from the questionnaire which was administered to second year EFL students and the interview which was conducted with the teachers of grammar at the University of Tamanghasset proved the need of effective strategies of teaching grammar that make EFL students change their attitudes toward grammar teaching positively. The findings might also arouse researchers' interest in further and wider research in the topic so that results are more general and serve as a reference to teachers and teacher trainers when addressing grammar teaching techniques and strategies in their seminars. Throughout this research study, we can conclude that a- The strategies that EFL teachers apply to teach grammar is the explicit-deductive method and the implicit-inductive method, b- The EFL students have positive attitudes toward grammar teaching strategies. The

results obtained also reveal that it is really important to not teach grammar in isolation but rather to relate its teaching to a situational context in which the teaching of grammar is completely shifted from a classical grammar to spoken grammar in communicative settings. In this respect, it is much recommended to subordinate foreign language grammar instruction to mediating explicit and implicit approaches accounting for both the declarative and procedural dimensions of knowledge about language in order to optimize students' achievement.

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