

## Exploring Korean EFL University Students' Perceptions of Grammar Instruction

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The purpose of this study is to explore Korean EFL university students' perceptions about grammar instruction in terms of providing teachers with some valuable insights for constructing effective grammar instruction and developing focus-on-form syllabus. For this purpose, the qualitative questionnaire, which was designed by Burgess and Etherington (2002) to find out teachers' attitude to grammar and its teaching and learning within an English for academic purpose (EAP) context in British university centers, was adapted and used. A total of 52 students who took the reading course in the second semester of 2005 took part in this survey. The overall findings of the survey showed the followings: the majority of students valued grammar exclusively; they wanted explicit and conscious knowledge of the grammatical systems; they considered practice of the structures essential; they believed the practice of structures should be within a full, communicative context; and they thought productive practice and intensive instruction of structures to be necessary in order to improve language proficiency. To conclude, it is suggested that intensive grammar instruction with a focus-on-form approach be implemented to motivate students' desire to learn English. It is also suggested that the teacher manage classes with explicit structure-based tasks along with practicing communicative examples of structure in context after formal instruction.

### I. INTRODUCTION

A brief review of foreign language methodologies shows that the mode of grammar instruction has changed drastically in the last fifty years based on the favored methodology. While the grammar translation method concentrated on dealing with the various morphological and syntactic principles of the target language, the audio-lingual method focused on the form of dialogues and pattern drills, which were highly structured in the grammatical syllabus. Proponents of the cognitive approach stressed students'

understanding the rules for using target language structures before using them for communication. With the advent of the popularity of various communicative approaches, however, especially in Asian EFL countries which include Korea, Japan and China, the predominant role of grammar has been called into question. The disfavor of a heavy grammar focus in language teaching might be at least partially due to the influence of Krashen's monitor hypothesis, which posits that the role of explicit grammar knowledge is limited to that of a monitor (Terrell, 1991).

Despite its retreat in the communicative language classroom, the role of grammar has long been the critical issue of foreign language teaching among many researchers during the last 10 years (Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Ellis, 2001, 2006; Muncie, 2002; Thornsbury, 1997, 1998). In recent years, for instance, the field of EFL pedagogy has witnessed an increasing interest in the idea of focus on form and the suggestion that attention to form should be encouraged in the classroom (Doughty & Williams, 1998). More than that, researchers have agreed to emphasize the importance of grammar instruction in EFL classrooms, chiefly because they believed the grammatical knowledge to be helpful for students to increase their general English proficiency. Bax (2003) criticizes the pure communicative language teaching (CLT) without the consideration of any context and Fotos (2002) suggests that general explanations of the target language structure should precede communicative tasks in order to activate previously developed knowledge and facilitate the establishment of form-meaning relationships, thereby strongly recommending structure-based communicative task performance. Ellis (2002), who has published much research on grammar, also says that teaching grammar can have a beneficial effect on the learner's interlanguage development. He goes on to say that grammatical knowledge cannot be acquired with only the exposure to the L2 and mentions several reasons for learners' failure to achieve high levels of grammatical competence in terms of age, communicative sufficiency, limited opportunities for pushed output, and lack of negative feedback (2002).

Given the current Korean EFL context, which has been characterized by a definite shift toward the use of CLT aimed at improving learners' balanced communicative competence (Guilloteaux, 2004; Hae-Ri Kim, 2004), it is necessary for teachers to be familiar with the explicit form-focused knowledge of the target language as well as content-based, meaningful activities which allow students to develop both accuracy and fluency in their target language proficiency. More importantly, teachers who want to implement effective grammar teaching in the classroom need to understand the students' needs regarding grammar and grammar instruction, thus incorporating the knowledge of the target language structure into communicative activities based on students' needs.

In light of the role of grammar and grammar teaching, this study examines Korean EFL university students' perceptions of grammar instruction. For this study, the two-page long

questionnaire, which was designed by Burgess and Etherington (2002) who attempted to identify teachers' attitudes toward grammar instruction in an EAP context in British language centres, was properly modified and used.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 1. CLT Approach and Context Approach

Due to its widely accepted educational benefits, such as stressing interaction, encouraging meaningful activities, and advocating the integration of the four language skills and holistic practice, CLT has long been considered to be the best teaching method for acquiring communicative competence, particularly in the EFL context. Recent studies, however, have emphasized the importance of context again in foreign language teaching (Bax, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 2001). Within the varying criticisms of CLT related to the learning context, Bax (2003) indicated that CLT was pursued in a wide variety of circumstances in order to acquire communicative competence, but it neglected learning context and learner variables. He went on to argue that CLT has always neglected one key aspect of language teaching - namely the context in which it takes place - and that the consequences of this are serious, to the extent that we need to demote CLT as our main paradigm (Bax, 2003). Regarding context, Breen (1986) had already emphasized the importance of context in that it includes various factors such as students' learning needs, styles, strategies, and even classroom cultures. This importance of learning context has been rather shadowed by the CLT attitude represented by the assumption that the priority is for the teacher to generate communication and thus CLT works no matter what the context is. Context approach, however, disagrees fundamentally with the CLT attitude by arguing that communicative methodology is not the magic solution, and that there are many different contexts to learn languages. According to Bax (2003), contextual awareness within a framework that generates communication is important, in a real sense, for successful foreign language acquisition.

### 2. Grammar Instruction

Researchers have had different views about the efficacy of grammar instruction. Much research has been published about the negative effects of grammar instruction. Especially Krashen (1981) did not think grammar instruction was an important factor in language acquisition since learners automatically proceed along their built-in syllabus if comprehensible input is given with abundant motivation. Polio, Fleck and Leder's (1998)

results showed that after experimenting with two groups of students, the experimental group who received grammar instruction did not show significantly better result in accuracy than the control group. However, Ellis (1990) and Fotos (2002) showed some positive results, indicating that formal grammar instruction can make students recognize features in input which later become part of their acquired knowledge. Muncie (2002) says that grammatical instruction is as important of a tool for communication as content and any text cannot be written without paying attention to how meaning is conveyed via grammar. In addition, Ellis (1993) emphasized the different kinds of grammar instruction from those used before the 1980's and said that learners do not follow the natural order mentioned by Krashen and that new knowledge is added to students' existing knowledge and explicit knowledge via grammar instruction can develop into implicit knowledge, which is a primary element of competence in an L2 environment (Ellis, 2006). Terrell (1991) says "grammatical instruction is indeed helpful in the acquisition process" (p. 62) and suggests three methods for grammar instruction. First, as an advance organizer to help learners make sense of input; second, as a meaning-form focus in communication activities, which helps learners in understanding meaning-form relationships; and third, as a monitoring tool, which helps learners to produce more accurate and complete utterances. In a recent study, Ellis (2006) says that "there is plentiful evidence that explicit instruction is effective in promoting L2 learning, but teaching grammar to intermediate level learners who have some ability to use the language is appropriate after meaning-focused instruction for complete beginners" (p. 97).

Researchers' mixed views about grammar instruction mentioned above suggest that there may be no single best approach to grammar teaching that would apply in all situations, and that teachers need to get appreciation of an eclectic view of teaching grammar.

### 3. Focus on Form and Focus on Forms

Recently new taxonomies for grammar instruction: 'Focus on form' or 'Focus on forms' has appeared. Many researchers (Dekeyser, 1998; Doughty, 1991; Harley, 1998; Lightbown, 1998) favor a more form-focused approach than a pure communicative approach, since the activities which focus solely on message are inadequate to develop an accurate knowledge of the language. Unlike the structural language approach where the primary focus of classroom activity is on language forms rather than the meanings they convey, some kind of form-focused activities needs to be incorporated into communicative classroom contexts so that students can be naturally exposed to the target language forms and meanings (Nassaji, 1999). Fotos and Ellis (1991) assert the effects of form-focused instruction on interlanguage development. In contrast, Lightbown and Spada (1990), Lightbown (1992), and Ellis (1995, 1998) advocate formal instruction prior to

meaning-focused activities maintaining that such instruction helps activate their previous knowledge of the target language structures and promotes their attention to the forms they will encounter (Fotos, 2002). The difference between focus on form and focus on forms is manifested succinctly in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**Division between Focus on Forms and Focus on Form in Grammar Teaching**

Focus on forms	Focus on form
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. isolation of forms</li> <li>. consciousness-raising techniques for explicit knowledge and rules</li> <li>. practice of individual structures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. focus on meaning and form in overall context of communication</li> <li>. meaning negotiation with focus of formal properties of language used</li> <li>. correction of errors during communicative activities</li> </ul>

(adapted from Burgess & Etherington, 2002, p. 438)

#### 4. Structure-based Interactive Tasks

Fotos (2002), who is quite familiar with EFL situation since she has been teaching in Japan, advocates formal, explicit, structure-based interactive tasks rather than purely communicative task-based approach. She acknowledges the advantages of a task-based approach which is applicable in ESL situation, but she doesn't think it valid in two specific areas of the EFL situation. First, access to real communicative tasks, both inside and outside the classroom, is extremely limited. Second, EFL learners do not have the same real-world needs for specific communicative functions in the target language as ESL learners do (Fotos, 2002). For EFL situations she stresses the suitability of structure-based tasks involving the development of formal knowledge and rules regarding English grammar and accuracy in the use of specific structures. After several experiments, Fotos (1993, 1994) asserted that explicit structure-based tasks were a useful communicative activity for EFL grammar instruction because they promoted proficiency gains and produced meaningful interaction (2002). This implies that a combination of formal instruction supported by performance of structure-based interactive tasks is desired.

#### 5. Difference between Korean Secondary and University Context

In the Korean secondary school context the national curriculum substantially controls the three major parts of English education, including the general objective of language learning, the detailed contents of instruction, and the evaluation procedure. The overall regulations of the national curriculum play a key role in implementing specific classroom

practices as well as selecting applicable syllabi and choosing proper textbooks. For instance, since the 7<sup>th</sup> revision of the national curriculum for English, which was first introduced and applied within secondary schools in 2001, the textbooks for middle and high schools in Korea have changed significantly, therefore indicating that grammar-based syllabi are not the only norm any longer and now include many spoken communicative activities. This implies that the Korean secondary school classroom practice has been characterized by a definite shift toward the use of CLT, which focuses on meaning-based activities. In university circumstances, in contrast, it is believed that students want to acquire the grammatical knowledge which they think is the most important element for getting high scores on proficiency measures such as the TOEFL or TOEIC. Large classes where there are over 50 students make it impossible to implement communicative activities and they want explicit grammatical explanation, which they are accustomed to. Opportunities for structure-based, interactive tasks following explicit instruction are rare and students think formal and intensive instruction is effective for acquiring complex rule systems. Especially in Korean university reading classes, it is true that the traditional method still prevails since there are still many instructors who were educated in the grammar-based approach; even though instructors know that communicative practice and tasks in a communicative context are essential for acquiring the target language structure. In other words, the problem is that there are not many opportunities for practicing the target feature because of the limited time and large class size (Ellis, 2006).

### **III. METHODS**

#### **1. Research Questions**

In an attempt to investigate Korean university students' perceptions about grammar learning, the present study examined students' understanding of the approaches to the teaching of grammar. In light of this, the following research questions were posed.

- 1) What are the students' beliefs regarding the role of grammar?
- 2) What are the aspects of students' practical understandings of grammar instruction?
- 3) Is there a bias toward a decontextualized practice of structures and a form-focused approach?

#### **2. Methods and Materials**

Students were administered an open-ended question form and a qualitative questionnaire.

The open-ended questions were conducted to gather participants' background information such as interests, learning experience, and TOEIC scores. The questionnaire dealt with the students' attitude regarding grammar learning in reading classes. Based on the questionnaire, which was partly adapted and modified from Burgess and Etherington's (2002) questionnaire, students were asked to answer each question using a five-point Likert scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.'

### 3. Subjects

Students answering the questionnaire were 52 university juniors in reading classes in the second semester of 2005. They attended 3 one-hour classes a week taught by the researcher. All of them had experience in learning English over 9 years since they started to learn English at middle school and had different academic majors. Most of the students mentioned that they had some high interests regarding English learning, but responded they had quite different levels of English proficiency. There were 8 high proficiency level students (TOEIC score 990-800), 23 intermediate level students (TOEIC score 795-600) and 14 low level students (TOEIC score 595-450).

### 4. Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was distributed to and collected from 52 students on the last day of the semester, when they took their final exam. The Likert-type items, which were designed to identify students' understanding of grammar conception and students' views on grammar instruction, were given a score in numbers (i.e., strongly disagree=1, disagree=2, neutral=3, agree=4, and strongly agree=5). The researcher explained the questionnaire in Korean so that students could answer the questions more effectively through understanding some unfamiliar terms such as 'decontextualised practice of structures' or 'productive practice of structures.'

### 5. Limitations of the Study

Given the importance of those factors, such as learner variables or validity in the qualitative research regarding learners' perceptions of language learning, this study acknowledges some limitations. First, the analysis sample from the extremely small population of learners limits the generalization of the results. Second, the lack of survey regarding teachers' perceptions of grammar instruction results in failing to acquire the meaningful differences between students' and teachers' beliefs of grammar learning. Finally,

the use of percentage comparison alone in data analysis makes it difficult to effectively compare and explain the participants' perception differences of grammar learning.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 presents a percentage comparison of student responses to each of the sixteen questions on grammar learning.

**TABLE 2**  
**Students' Responses on Grammar Learning (N=52)**

Questionnaire Items	Strongly disagree N (%)	Disagree N (%)	Neutral N (%)	Agree N (%)	Strongly agree N (%)
1a. The role of grammar in language is as: a framework for the rest of the language- a basic system to build everything else on.			2(3.8)	16(30.8)	34(65.4)
1b. the building blocks of language which are combined to form a whole.			2(3.8)	18(34.6)	32(61.6)
1c. something which is added on to language proficiency; arefinement of more basic language knowledge.		2(3.8)	30(57.7)	15(28.8)	5(9.7)
1d. an equal pillar with the knowledge of pronunciation, appropriacy and culture in supporting language proficiency.	15(28.8)	17(32.7)	20(38.5)		
2. We can learn grammar through exposure to language in natural use.		22(42.4)	28(53.8)	2(3.8)	
3. We need formal instruction to produce grammatically correct language.				4(7.7)	48(92.3)
4. Our use of language does not involve conscious knowledge of the grammatical system and how it works.	35(67.4)	15(28.8)	2(3.8)		
5. We need a conscious knowledge of grammar in order to improve our language.			2(3.8)	25(48.1)	25(48.1)
6. Grammatical accuracy can be improved through frequent practice of structures.				3(5.8)	49(94.2)
7. Practice of structures must always be within a full, communicative context.			7(13.5)	38(73.0)	7(13.5)
8. Separate treatment of grammar fails to produce language knowledge which we can use in natural communication.			7(13.5)	35(67.3)	10(19.2)

9. Decontextualised practice of structures has a place in language learning.	2(3.0)	4(7.0)	46(90.0)
10. We need to be consciously aware of a structure's form and its function before we can use it proficiently.	15(28.0)	22(42.3)	18(34.7)
11. Productive practice of structures is a necessary part of the learning process.	7(13.5)	10(19.2)	35(67.3)
12. Comparison and contrast of individual structures is helpful for our learning grammar.	11(21.1)	29(55.8)	12(23.1)
13. We learn grammar more successfully if it is presented within a complete text.	10(17.3)	25(48.1)	18(34.6)
14. Grammar is best taught through intensive instruction.	1(1.9)	2(3.8)	49(94.3)
15. Form-focused correction helps us to improve our grammatical performance.	16(30.8)	15(28.8)	21(40.4)
16. Explicit discussion of grammar rules is helpful for students.	6(11.5)	10(19.2)	36(69.3)

For question 1, relating to students' beliefs about the role of grammar, there were different views about grammar. Almost all of the students (96.2%) thought of grammar as "a framework for the rest of the language - a basic system to build everything else on" and "the building blocks of language which are combined to form a whole" (96.2%). While less than half of the students (38.5%) agreed with the statement that grammar is "something which is added on to language proficiency: a refinement of more basic language knowledge," more than half of the students (61.5%) disagreed with the statement that grammar is "an equal pillar with the knowledge of pronunciation, appropriacy and culture in supporting language proficiency." The findings show that students think grammar is more essential than any other variable within language proficiency. It also indicate that most of the students think grammar is an absolute and basic requirement for learning a language, not an equal component with pronunciation or culture, which are necessary to acquire communicative competence. From this data it can be inferred that grammar should be learned, either explicit or implicit way to satisfy students' needs.

For question 2, which asks whether the students feel they "can learn grammar through exposure to language in natural use," more than half of the students (53.8%) were neutral, 42.4% disagreed and only 3.8% agreed. These results may come from the fact that they were not used to learning English only by exposure to the language in natural use during their junior or senior school days.

For question 3, which asks whether the students feel that they "need formal instruction

to produce grammatically correct language,” all of the students answered positively (92.3% strongly agreed, 7.7% agreed). This shows that students want deductive, explicit grammar teaching and declarative knowledge for the accuracy of their English, and that supports Long’s (1998) view that formal instruction promotes more rapid acquisition and contributes to higher levels of knowledge. Spada (1986), however, indicates that formal instruction works best in promoting acquisition when it is linked with opportunities for natural communication.

For questions 4 and 5, which ask about conscious knowledge of the grammatical system, a vast majority of the students (96.2%) acknowledged the relationship between their use of language and conscious knowledge of the grammatical system and therefore believe they need grammatical knowledge in order to improve their target language proficiency. This indicates that when students use English, they should be conscious of the correctness of grammar, thus trying to acquire the knowledge of grammar.

For question 6, regarding grammatical accuracy through frequent practice of structures, no one disagreed. This shows that students think they can increase their accuracy in using English based on the practice of structures which is an important, perhaps even essential, factor in learning a language.

For question 7, asking whether practice of structures should be within a full, communicative context, most students (86.5%) responded positively. This indicates that they believe isolated presentation or practice is not an effective way to learn a language. It is consistent with the findings of question 8, which shows that separate treatment of grammar fails to produce language knowledge that we can use in natural communication. It is also supported by Celce-Murcia’s (2002) view that context-free knowledge is of less value than contextualized knowledge. Yet it was slightly contradictory to the findings of question 9, in which a vast majority of the students (97%) responded that decontextualized practice of structures has a place in English learning. The findings of question 7 through 9 indicate that students believe decontextualized practice to be somewhat helpful for their language learning, even though practice of structures should be within a communicative context.

For questions 10, 11, 12, and 13, regarding students’ learning styles of grammar, most of the students (77%) answered that they should be aware of a structure’s form and its function before they use it, and a clear majority of the students (86.5%) agreed to the fact that the productive practice of structure is a necessary part of the learning process. While few students (23.1%) favored comparing and contrasting of individual structures in their learning of grammar, most students (82.7%) believed that they would learn grammar more successfully if it was presented within a complete text. The findings suggest that the potential lack of confidence about form and function may be caused by the lack of productive practice, therefore resulting in preventing students from using the target

language proficiently. They also indicate that students learn grammar more effectively in a meaningful context rather than with individual structures.

For questions 14, 15, and 16, relating to the instructional method of grammar, a vast majority of the students (94.3%) strongly agreed that grammar is best taught through intensive instruction. In addition, more than half of the students (69.2%) believed that form-focused correction helps them to improve their grammatical performance and most students (88.5%) answered that explicit discussion of grammar is helpful for students. The findings partially show that students like clear, direct explanations regarding the grammatical rules, thus showing some preference for focusing on form rather than focusing on forms. These findings are supported by Ellis's (2006) assumption that grammar teaching has been typically viewed as entailing intensive instruction, particularly in the EFL context.

The findings from questions 1 to 16 have revealed the exclusive tendency toward one side on the spectrum, that students consider grammar as an essential, indispensable, and the most important component in learning a language. It also indicates that students not only want some clear explanation regarding language structures but also believe full or meaningful communicative context to be helpful for learning grammar, thus recognizing the key roles of form-focused correction, productive practice, and explicit discussion in the learning process.

## V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore Korean university students' perceptions about grammar learning in terms of developing proper syllabi in university level English courses where many conversation classes with native speakers are offered.

The overall findings of the study have revealed that the majority of students want explicit and intensive instruction regarding grammar, based on the following beliefs: grammar serves as the building blocks of language, which then combined, form a whole; conscious knowledge of the grammatical system involves the use of language; practice of structures should be within a full, communicative context; productive practice and intensive instruction of structures are necessary to improve language proficiency; and form-focused correction as well as explicit discussion is helpful for promoting grammatical performance.

The findings from the study also reveal some important implications for teachers when designing form-focused syllabi and teaching grammar effectively in a university level classroom. First, since students' perceptions regarding the role of grammar are firm and positive, it is necessary for the teacher to manage classes with explicit structure-based tasks

along with practicing communicative examples of structure in context after formal instruction. Second, given the research finding that students have a strong conviction for the usefulness of grammatical knowledge, it is also required that teachers consider intensive instruction regarding language structure based on complete and contextualized materials. Finally, teachers need to make a conscious effort to provide students with a complete and meaningful text containing explicit knowledge about the target language structure, thereby helping students convert explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge. More importantly, follow-up research needs to assess students' motivational factors, which are closely related with their perception of grammar as a learning tool.

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## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to examine Korean university students' beliefs of grammar instruction on a reading class. For each of the following statements, please answer by putting √ in a box, according to the following scale: SD (strongly disagree), D (disagree), N (neutral), A (agree), SA (strongly agree). Please answer all of the questions as best as you can. Your answers will be kept confidential. Thank you for your cooperation.

Questionnaire Items	SD	D	N	A	SA
1a. The role of grammar in language is as: a framework for the rest of the language- a basic system to build everything else on.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
1b. the building blocks of language which are combined to form a whole.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
1c. something which is added on to language proficiency; a refinement of more basic language knowledge.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
1d. an equal pillar with the knowledge of pronunciation, appropriacy and culture in supporting language proficiency.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
2. We can learn grammar through exposure to language in natural use.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

3. We need formal instruction to produce grammatically correct language.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
4. Our use of language does not involve conscious knowledge of the grammatical system and how it works.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
5. We need a conscious knowledge of grammar in order to improve our language.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
6. Grammatical accuracy can be improved through frequent practice of structures.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
7. Practice of structures must always be within a full, communicative context.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
8. Separate treatment of grammar fails to produce language knowledge which we can use in natural communication.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
9. Decontextualised practice of structures has a place in language learning.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
10. We need to be consciously aware of a structure's form and its function before we can use it proficiently.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
11. Productive practice of structures is a necessary part of the learning process.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
12. Comparison and contrast of individual structures is helpful for our learning grammar.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
13. We learn grammar more successfully if it is presented within a complete text.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
14. Grammar is best taught through intensive instruction.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
15. Form-focused correction helps us to improve our grammatical performance.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
16. Explicit discussion of grammar rules is helpful for students.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Applicable level: secondary and university education level

Key words: grammar instruction, form-focused context, explicit or implicit knowledge of grammar

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