

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Learners of English as foreign language preference for grammar strategies in learning grammar

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This study explores the needs analysis of grammar skills of learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a private institution. The objective of this study is to investigate EFL learner's preferences for selected grammar strategies. The sample size consists of 20 EFL students from the intermediate level. The learners were given four-point Likert scale questionnaire which consists of 11 items in total to execute the grammar strategies preferred by them. The questionnaire can be divided into two sections. The first section is how they use certain strategies to improve their grammar ability which consists of eight items. The second section is when they encounter rules and sentences structure that they do not understand which consists of three items. The five main strategies were identified based on the responses that had higher percentages from 60 - 75%. The main two strategies that good language learners employ in learning grammar are the use of formula and visual. These would give them a better understanding and fun way of learning grammar. Thus, these strategies can be further developed into suitable learning materials to cater to their needs and enhance the mastery of their grammar skills.

**Key words:** Needs analysis, grammar strategies, visual aid.

## INTRODUCTION

Learners' needs have to be taken into consideration because they can help educators to design and develop suitable learning materials that will allow them to engage in language learning. Learners' needs will give new avenues for course design and development of suitable lessons to be presented to them. Moreover, there is little variation in the teaching of grammar, as grammar has often been taught in traditional ways.

Learning of grammar is important because it allows you to express your thoughts and intentions in a way that is acceptable to native speakers (Rubin and Thompson, 1994). There are few strategies being applied by good language learners (GLL) when they are learning

grammar. The two effective main strategies applied by GLL are the use of formula and visual. Learners' preferences would give some idea of how learners would like to engage in their grammar lessons. This study aims to investigate EFL students' preference for grammar strategies in learning grammar.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Rajabi and Azarpour (2011) stated that needs analysis has been emphasised in designing almost any educational programmes including foreign language learning.

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**Table 1.** Four-point Likert scale.

Grammar strategies	This strategy does not fit me	I have tried this strategy and would use it again	I use this strategy and like it	I've never used this strategy but am interested in it
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Kayi (2008) defined that needs analysis is explored in order to gather the contents of syllabuses, the present and future skills, tasks most frequently performed by students and future tasks as well as the objectives of the course.

Geysler (2006) claimed that needs analysis and syllabus design are essentially two different things. Needs analysis is product-oriented; it concerns what learners should know or be able to do as a result of instructions. Syllabus design is process-oriented which is concerned with the process by which learners will learn. Pawanchik and Kamil (2010) asserted that 'needs' in today's English language learning not only refers to the requirements of learners but also takes into account those of the teaching institutions, the user-institutions and even the society at large.

Pawanchik and Kamil (2010) claimed that learners' current language proficiency and difficulties have to be taken into account in relation to what they want and expect. This is because, each individual has their own needs and they vary from person to person. In order to be successful in teaching and learning a language, the educators need to identify the needs of students. As soon as the right needs of students are determined, steps can be taken to address the issues. It is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle; once the right pieces have been discovered, the entire picture can be formed.

Moreover, Rubin and Thompson (1994) suggested that learners should be on the lookout for rules and not wait for someone to point out a rule; they should look for it on their own. Learners can formulate their own rules which would be more helpful than those given, because learners can organise them in ways that are clearer to them. This can help them to remember and apply the rules as they have discovered them on their own. In his findings, Zaki (2011) stated that EFL learners consider formulas and mnemonic as the fastest ways to learn grammar as compared to rote learning.

According to Chitrevelu et al. (2005), visual aid (pictures, maps, diagrams, graphs, table and charts) can help learners with limited knowledge of English by providing the context for presenting a new language. It can also arouse interest, stimulate interaction and help them to understand places, people and events as well as simplify situations which would otherwise be abstract and difficult to explain in words. There are many types of visual aids which can be useful for giving explanations about grammatical forms and their meanings.

Mohd (2000) claimed that learners can be made to

respond to these visual aids as the introductory part of the lesson. This will minimise teacher-talk and encourage learners to talk and interact, while responding to the pictures. He also believed that being able to understand or figure out situations from visual objects can be part of being communicatively competent. Thus, Rubin and Thompson (1994) stated that learners can organise their own grammar tables in a way that makes the most sense to them. This is especially important when it is an exception to a rule and needs special attention.

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

This study involved 20 EFL learners; they are learning English at the intermediate level at the English Language Centre. These learners are in their advanced stage of learning English. Each of them has his or her own way of mastering the language even though English is not emphasised in their respective countries. They are taught English in the classroom, and it is the only English speaking environment for them. These learners are between the ages of 17 to 19 from China, Mongolia, Yeman and Cambodia.

In order to identify their learning preferences for grammar strategies, a questionnaire was distributed to the learners. The questionnaire was developed by Cohen et al. (2002) and it was adapted and adopted in this study for grammar strategies. The participants were required to give their responses for each strategy by checking the appropriate scales given. The scales used are based on the Likert-type scale as proposed by Cohen et al. (2002) shown in Table 1.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to find out the learning strategies preferred by the participants in order to develop the grammar module, which would help them to improve their grammar skills eventually.

## RESULTS

Table 2 shows the respondents' preferences for grammar strategies. This study only focuses on the five main strategies where the respondents have tried and would use them again based on the grammar preference survey. The learners use three main strategies to improve their grammar abilities. The first grammar strategy identified by the writer is using five senses to differentiate abstract and concrete nouns; 65% of them have tried and would use it again. Borghi et al. (2011) have summarised that concrete and abstract nouns should be intended as a continuum and the difference between the words is not precise. As such, they can use their five senses to differentiate the abstract and concrete nouns.

The second grammar strategy is learning prepositions

**Table 2.** Findings of students' preferences for grammar strategies.

<b>Strategies to improve my grammar ability</b>	<b>Grammar strategies</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Using table to form plural nouns.	This strategy doesn't fit me	15
	I have tried this strategy and would use it again	40
	I use this strategy and like it	20
	I've never used this strategy but am interested in it	25
Using five senses to differentiate abstract / concrete nouns.	This strategy doesn't fit me	5
	I have tried this strategy and would use it again	65
	I use this strategy and like it	15
	I've never used this strategy but am interested in it	15
Learning prepositions through pictures.	This strategy doesn't fit me	10
	I have tried this strategy and would use it again	65
	I use this strategy and like it	15
	I've never used this strategy but am interested in it	10
Focusing on articles when reading song lyrics.	This strategy doesn't fit me	20
	I have tried this strategy and would use it again	25
	I use this strategy and like it	30
	I've never used this strategy but am interested in it	25
Learning to write/speak out adjectives in the correct order through the use of adjective chart.	This strategy doesn't fit me	5
	I have tried this strategy and would use it again	75
	I use this strategy and like it	10
	I've never used this strategy but am interested in it	10
Group parts of speech when reading newspaper / magazines.	This strategy doesn't fit me	35
	I have tried this strategy and would use it again	25
	I use this strategy and like it	25
	I've never used this strategy but am interested in it	15
Using short texts or short stories to categorise proper / common nouns.	This strategy doesn't fit me	20
	I have tried this strategy and would use it again	15%
	I use this strategy and like it	40%
	I've never used this strategy but am interested in it	25%
Learn different parts of speech to identify the appropriate words used in sentences according to their parts of speech.	This strategy doesn't fit me	30%
	I have tried this strategy and would use it again	25%
	I use this strategy and like it	35%
	I've never used this strategy but am interested in it	10%
<b>When I encounter rules and sentence structure that I do not understand:</b>		
Underline / cross out adverbs according to its usage in a passage / text.	This strategy doesn't fit me	15%
	I have tried this strategy and would use it again	65%
	I use this strategy and like it	5%
	I've never used this strategy but am interested in it	15%

Table 2. Contd.

Use formula to memorise conjunctions.	This strategy doesn't fit me	20%
	I have tried this strategy and would use it again	60%
	I use this strategy and like it	15%
	I've never used this strategy but am interested in it	5%
Underline the sentence parts with different colours.	This strategy doesn't fit me	25%
	I have tried this strategy and would use it again	35%
	I use this strategy and like it	25%
	I've never used this strategy but am interested in it	15%

through pictures; 65% of them have tried and would use it again. Prepositions are often vague and confusing, even for native speakers (Boquist, 2009). Learners might find this strategy useful as they can visualise by using their imaginations to understand or to distinguish the use of prepositions. The third strategy is learning to write or speak out adjectives in the correct order through the use of the adjective chart; 75% of them have tried and would they encounter rules and sentence structures that they do not understand. The strategy that has been identified is underline/cross out adverbs according to its usage in a passage/ ext; 65% of them have tried and would use it again. A very common type of mistake made by learners is in constructing grammatical structure involving the use of adverbs; learners tend to misplace them in the sentences (Hernandez, 2006). The learners might think that this strategy works for them as they can use this method to recognise adverbs. The other strategy is using formula to memorise conjunctions; 60% of them have tried and would use it again. Studies have shown that the use of conjunctions can be problematic for EFL learners (Chan, 2004). Perhaps, the use of formula can help the learners to memorise the rules and the usage of conjunctions.

The survey has helped to identify the five main strategies which are frequently used by learners to improve their grammar abilities and when they are dealing with difficult grammar rules. They are motivated to learn grammar in the FL classroom; as good language learners, they are determined to do it. The learners are motivated to learn grammar because they know the importance of it in constructing sentences. Thus, using grammar strategies can motivate them to learn the language and it has become a key factor which acts as driving force throughout the entire process; it is not a flash-in-the-pan experience at the beginning of the course. In FL settings, learners need certain strategies to persevere in their endeavours to master a language. In addition, the actual language classroom is a vital source of learning language for EFL learners. Even with other factors affecting their language learning, language learning strategies can help

use it again. McMahon (2008) has carried out a study on the order of the adjectives where most Asian L2 learners find it difficult to place the adjectives in order because the order varies from language to language. From the learner's point of view, this strategy might be applicable to learn the correct order of adjectives and help them to construct sentences in the right order.

There are two main strategies the learners use when them to excel in the learning curve; besides, the classroom itself plays a vital role in stimulating and sustaining the interest of language learning, regardless of any of the four skills.

## DISCUSSION

The primary focus of this study is to detect grammar strategies preferred by EFL learners. This study did not emphasise on the factors that affect language learning strategies, which might have indirect or direct contribution to their success. Each strategy has its own objective on how to tackle the difficulty in learning grammar. The order of adjectives would help the learners to write and pronounce the adjectives in its correct order, the use of "My Five Senses" would help the students to distinguish the differences between abstract and concrete nouns, clouds of adverbs enable the learners to question themselves with "when", "where" and "how often" an action happens in order for them to use the appropriate adverb in a sentence, the use of FANBOYS would help them to understand the coordinating conjunctions and the correct way to apply them when constructing a sentence and the use of "My Visual Preposition" would help the learners to visualise the position of an item or object and allows them to use the correct preposition to describe the location. The learners use these approaches to handle and master their grammar knowledge. These learners are in the advanced stage of English proficiency and they are aware of their needs. Educators can also look into the needs of low-proficiency learners and develop suitable learning materials which can stimulate their interest and

achieve greater success in learning the English language. In the final analysis, learners' needs are an important factor to consider because it helps course designers and developers to keep abreast with the current needs of learners, which would eventually help educators to create suitable language learning materials. As such, by incorporating grammar strategies, creative language learning materials can be developed for both the advanced and poor learners, according to the respective levels of difficulties. These innovative materials will capture the interest of learners in acquiring grammar skills.

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