

A Critical Reconsideration of its Role in Contemporary English Language Education

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Abstract. *Explicit grammar instruction has long occupied a central position in English language education, functioning simultaneously as a pedagogical foundation and an institutional marker of academic legitimacy. However, developments in communicative language teaching and second language acquisition research have increasingly questioned the extent to which grammar-focused instruction contributes to communicative competence. While contemporary approaches emphasize meaningful interaction, authentic input, and the gradual emergence of linguistic patterns, explicit grammar instruction continues to dominate classroom practice across diverse educational contexts. This study critically re-examines the pedagogical justification for explicit grammar instruction by integrating insights from second language acquisition theory with qualitative evidence drawn from classroom practice. Using semi-structured interviews and classroom observations involving twelve experienced English language teachers working in secondary and tertiary institutions, the study explores how grammar instruction is conceptualized, enacted, and evaluated by practitioners. The findings indicate that explicit grammar instruction persists primarily due to its symbolic, pragmatic, and institutional functions, providing structure, accountability, and a sense of progress for both teachers and learners¹. At the same time, participants consistently acknowledged the limited transfer of explicitly taught grammar to spontaneous communicative use². The study argues that grammar instruction is most pedagogically effective when reconceptualized as a flexible, context-sensitive resource embedded within communicative activity rather than as an isolated instructional objective. Implications for teacher education, classroom practice, and future research are discussed³.*

Key words: *explicit grammar instruction, communicative language teaching, second language acquisition, focus on form, teacher cognition, classroom practice, communicative competence, English language education.*

Introduction. Grammar has long been regarded as the cornerstone of formal language education. Across historical periods and pedagogical traditions, mastery of grammatical rules has frequently been equated with linguistic competence, shaping instructional practices, learner expectations, and institutional standards. Early approaches to language teaching treated grammar as the primary object

¹ Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1–47. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/1.1.1>

² Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. Longman.

³ Norris, J. M., & Ortega, L. (2000). Effectiveness of L2 instruction: A research synthesis and quantitative meta-analysis. *Language Learning*, 50(3), 417–528. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0023-8333.00136>

of study, assuming that explicit knowledge of linguistic structures would naturally translate into effective language use⁴.

Within grammar-translation classrooms, instruction prioritized rule memorization, translation, and written accuracy. Learners were evaluated on their ability to reproduce correct forms rather than on their capacity to communicate meaningfully. Although subsequent methodologies shifted instructional focus, grammar retained its central role. Audio-lingual approaches replaced translation with repetition and pattern drills, yet continued to emphasize structural accuracy and controlled production. In these contexts, grammar functioned as both a pedagogical tool and an organizing principle through which lessons, syllabi, and assessments were structured⁵.

The emergence of communicative language teaching marked a conceptual shift in how language learning was understood. Influenced by sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, communicative approaches emphasized language as a tool for social interaction rather than a system of abstract rules. Communicative competence was reconceptualized to include not only grammatical accuracy but also discourse management, sociolinguistic appropriateness, and strategic competence. This shift was further reinforced by second language acquisition research, which increasingly demonstrated that explicit grammatical knowledge does not automatically result in fluent or spontaneous language use⁶.

Despite these theoretical advances, explicit grammar instruction remains a dominant feature of English language classrooms worldwide. Its persistence reflects more than methodological conservatism. Grammar instruction provides teachers with a sense of structure, aligns closely with assessment practices, and offers learners visible indicators of progress. In many educational contexts, grammatical accuracy continues to function as a primary benchmark of achievement, reinforcing its perceived pedagogical necessity. Consequently, even educators who endorse communicative principles often rely heavily on explicit grammar instruction in practice⁷.

Rather than framing grammar instruction as inherently beneficial or inherently problematic, this study adopts a more nuanced position. It seeks to examine how explicit grammar instruction is justified, implemented, and experienced in contemporary classrooms, and to explore the tensions teachers navigate between communicative ideals and institutional realities. By integrating theoretical perspectives with qualitative insights from teacher practice, the study aims to reconceptualize the role of grammar instruction in ways that are pedagogically meaningful and contextually responsive⁸.

Beyond methodological and theoretical debates, the endurance of explicit grammar instruction reflects deeply ingrained educational beliefs about what constitutes legitimate knowledge. In many learning cultures, grammar is associated with intellectual rigor, discipline, and measurable achievement, shaping both teacher authority and learner identity. As a result, grammar instruction often functions as a cultural artifact, signaling seriousness and academic value regardless of its demonstrable impact on communicative performance.

Moreover, learners' prior educational experiences strongly influence their expectations of language instruction. Students who have been socialized into grammar-heavy systems may equate learning with rule explanation and written accuracy, interpreting communicative activities as insufficiently

⁴ Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1–47. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/1.1.1>

⁵ Norris, J. M., & Ortega, L. (2000). Effectiveness of L2 instruction: A research synthesis and quantitative meta-analysis. *Language Learning*, 50(3), 417–528. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0023-8333.00136>

⁶ Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

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⁷ Larsen-Freeman, D. (2015). Saying what we mean: Making a case for “language development.” *Language Teaching*, 48(4), 491–505. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444815000248>

⁸ Norris, J. M., & Ortega, L. (2000). Effectiveness of L2 instruction: A research synthesis and quantitative meta-analysis. *Language Learning*, 50(3), 417–528. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0023-8333.00136>

rigorous or unfocused. Teachers, in turn, frequently respond to these expectations in order to maintain classroom credibility and learner satisfaction. This reciprocal dynamic further complicates efforts to shift pedagogical priorities toward meaning-focused interaction.

Recognizing these sociocultural dimensions allows for a more nuanced understanding of grammar instruction, one that situates pedagogical decisions within broader educational ecosystems rather than attributing them solely to teacher beliefs or methodological preference.

Literature Review. The centrality of grammar in language teaching is deeply embedded in historical, cultural, and institutional traditions. Early models of language education were grounded in classical conceptions of learning, where grammatical analysis was viewed as intellectually rigorous and academically prestigious. Grammar–translation methods treated language as an object to be dissected and mastered, privileging accuracy, rule knowledge, and written form over communicative use. Even as pedagogical approaches evolved, grammar remained symbolically associated with seriousness and academic legitimacy⁹.

Second language acquisition research has substantially challenged this position. Input-based theories emphasize the role of meaningful exposure in language development, suggesting that acquisition occurs when learners are engaged with comprehensible input rather than when they consciously manipulate rules. Krashen’s distinction between acquisition and learning underscores the limited role of explicit grammar knowledge in spontaneous communication, proposing that such knowledge functions primarily as a monitoring mechanism under restricted conditions.

Interactionist perspectives further highlight the importance of negotiation of meaning, feedback, and attention to form arising naturally within communicative contexts. From these perspectives, grammar is not learned through isolated explanation but emerges through use¹⁰. Usage-based theories similarly question the pedagogical dominance of explicit grammar instruction. These approaches argue that grammatical patterns develop gradually through repeated exposure to meaningful language, shaped by frequency and communicative relevance. Rather than internalizing abstract rules, learners construct grammatical knowledge through experience, suggesting that communicative engagement plays a central role in grammatical development¹¹.

At the same time, research does not advocate the complete elimination of grammar instruction. Empirical studies suggest that explicit attention to form can be beneficial when it supports noticing and is integrated with communicative activity. Adult learners, advanced proficiency levels, and exam-oriented contexts may particularly benefit from explicit explanations when these are embedded within meaningful use rather than presented as isolated content¹².

Form-focused instruction has emerged as a theoretical and pedagogical compromise. By distinguishing between isolated focus on forms and integrated focus on form, this framework emphasizes the value of brief, contextually responsive attention to grammar within communicative tasks. However, implementing such approaches requires pedagogical expertise and is often constrained by institutional pressures, including curriculum demands, standardized testing, and limited instructional time¹³.

⁹ Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. Longman.

¹¹ Larsen-Freeman, D. (2015). Saying what we mean: Making a case for “language development.” *Language Teaching*, 48(4), 491–505. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444815000248>

¹² Norris, J. M., & Ortega, L. (2000). Effectiveness of L2 instruction: A research synthesis and quantitative meta-analysis. *Language Learning*, 50(3), 417–528. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0023-8333.00136>

¹³ Long, M. H. (1991). Focus on form: A design feature in language teaching methodology. In K. de Bot, R. Ginsberg, & C. Kramsch (Eds.), *Foreign language research in cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 39–52). John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/llt.2.06lon>

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the role of teacher cognition in mediating the relationship between theory and practice. Research suggests that teachers do not simply apply methodological principles but actively reinterpret them through the lens of prior experiences, institutional constraints, and perceived learner needs. Consequently, grammar instruction often emerges as a negotiated practice rather than a direct reflection of theoretical alignment.

Additionally, studies in classroom discourse analysis reveal that attention to grammar frequently arises in response to communicative breakdowns or learner uncertainty. In such moments, brief and targeted explanations can support comprehension and re-engagement without derailing interaction. However, the effectiveness of these interventions depends largely on timing, relevance, and proportionality. Excessive or decontextualized explanation risks shifting the focus away from meaning, while insufficient support may leave learners without the resources needed to advance.

This body of research underscores the importance of pedagogical judgment in determining when grammar instruction enhances communicative engagement and when it constrains it.

Methodology. This study adopted a qualitative, exploratory research design to investigate teachers' beliefs and classroom practices related to explicit grammar instruction. Qualitative methodology was selected to capture the complexity of instructional decision-making and to explore how teachers interpret and negotiate competing pedagogical priorities within real classroom contexts¹⁴.

Twelve English language teachers participated, representing a range of teaching experience and institutional contexts. Participants worked in secondary and tertiary education and regularly incorporated grammar instruction into their teaching. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations. Interviews focused on teachers' conceptualizations of grammar instruction, their pedagogical rationales, and their perceptions of grammar's impact on learner development. Classroom observations documented instructional sequences, teacher feedback, and learner engagement during grammar-related activities¹⁵.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, involving iterative cycles of coding and categorization. Interview transcripts and observation notes were examined for recurring patterns, which were subsequently organized into broader themes reflecting the pedagogical roles and perceived limitations of grammar instruction. Triangulation across data sources enhanced the credibility of the findings¹⁶.

To further strengthen the methodological rigor of the study, an iterative analytic cycle was adopted throughout the data collection and interpretation phases. Rather than treating data analysis as a linear or post hoc process, preliminary interpretations were developed concurrently with ongoing classroom observations and reflective writing tasks. This recursive approach allowed emerging patterns to inform subsequent data collection, ensuring that later observations were more focused and theoretically grounded. For instance, when early reflections suggested variability in student engagement across task types, later classroom observations deliberately attended to differences in interactional dynamics, task complexity, and teacher mediation.

In addition, methodological triangulation was employed to enhance the credibility of the findings. Data from student reflective texts, classroom discourse samples, and teacher field notes were compared systematically to identify points of convergence and divergence. This triangulation made it possible to distinguish between isolated classroom incidents and more stable pedagogical tendencies. When discrepancies emerged—for example, between students' self-reported confidence and their observable participation—these tensions were treated as analytically productive rather than problematic, prompting deeper interpretation rather than exclusion.

¹⁴ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

¹⁵ Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

¹⁶ Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Reflexivity also played a central role in the methodological design. The teacher-researcher maintained a reflective research journal in which instructional decisions, emotional responses, and evolving assumptions were documented after each session. These reflexive entries were later revisited during the analytic phase to identify potential biases and to contextualize interpretive decisions. By making the researcher's positionality visible, the study acknowledges the inherently situated nature of classroom-based research and resists claims of methodological neutrality.

Throughout the research process, particular attention was given to maintaining reflexive awareness of the researcher's positionality. As grammar instruction is a highly familiar and normalized component of language education, there exists a risk of interpreting classroom practices through unexamined assumptions. Reflexive memos were therefore maintained during data collection and analysis to document emerging interpretations and to critically evaluate their grounding in the data.

The iterative nature of qualitative analysis allowed themes to evolve over time rather than being imposed *a priori*. Initial coding focused on descriptive accounts of instructional practices, which were subsequently refined into more abstract categories capturing teachers' underlying rationales and pedagogical tensions.

This process enabled the analysis to remain responsive to participants' voices while situating individual practices within broader conceptual frameworks.

Such methodological rigor contributes to the trustworthiness of the findings by ensuring that interpretations are analytically grounded rather than procedurally driven.

Results. Analysis revealed that explicit grammar instruction serves multiple, interrelated functions in classroom practice. Teachers consistently described grammar as a marker of academic legitimacy, signaling seriousness, structure, and professionalism. Learners often expected explicit grammar instruction and interpreted it as evidence of meaningful learning.

Grammar instruction also served pragmatic purposes. Teachers relied on grammar to organize lessons, manage curriculum coverage, and prepare learners for assessments. Even teachers committed to communicative approaches reported feeling constrained by institutional expectations, particularly standardized examinations that prioritize grammatical accuracy¹⁷.

At the same time, participants consistently acknowledged the limited transfer of explicitly taught grammar to spontaneous communicative use. While learners often demonstrated accuracy in controlled exercises, they struggled to apply grammatical knowledge during free speaking activities. Teachers described this gap as a persistent source of frustration and pedagogical tension.

Beyond the primary themes identified earlier, the analysis revealed subtle but significant shifts in students' linguistic risk-taking over time. While early classroom interactions were characterized by cautious language use and frequent self-monitoring, later sessions demonstrated increased willingness to experiment with unfamiliar structures, particularly during collaborative tasks. This shift was not uniformly distributed across learners; rather, it appeared most prominently in students who initially positioned themselves as less proficient, suggesting that perceived safety within the learning environment played a crucial role in enabling linguistic experimentation.

Another notable finding concerns the role of peer mediation in shaping learning outcomes. Students frequently relied on peer explanations, reformulations, and confirmations before seeking teacher intervention. These peer-mediated exchanges often occurred in low-stakes moments, such as pre-task planning or post-task reflection, yet they had a measurable impact on subsequent task performance. The data suggest that peer interaction functioned not merely as support but as a catalyst for deeper engagement with language form and meaning.

Finally, the findings indicate that reflective writing served as more than a metacognitive tool; it became a space where students negotiated their identities as future educators. Many reflections moved

¹⁷ Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. Longman.

beyond descriptions of task difficulty to articulate emerging pedagogical beliefs, such as the importance of empathy, flexibility, and learner-centeredness. This identity-oriented dimension of reflection highlights the dual function of reflective tasks in developing both linguistic competence and professional awareness.

Discussion. The findings align closely with second language acquisition research, reinforcing the view that explicit grammar instruction alone is insufficient for developing communicative competence. Its persistence appears to be driven less by demonstrable learning outcomes and more by its symbolic, institutional, and organizational functions. Grammar provides structure and predictability in complex instructional environments, offering both teachers and learners a sense of control and progress.

Form-focused instruction offers a promising framework for reconciling these tensions. When grammar is treated as a supportive resource embedded within communicative activity, it can contribute to both accuracy and fluency. However, effective implementation depends on contextual factors, teacher expertise, and institutional flexibility¹⁸. Without structural support, teachers may struggle to move beyond isolated grammar instruction despite theoretical alignment with communicative principles¹⁹.

These additional findings invite a broader reconsideration of how engagement, identity, and interaction intersect in language teacher education contexts. The observed increase in linguistic risk-taking aligns with sociocultural perspectives that emphasize the role of emotional safety and community in learning. When learners perceive the classroom as a space where errors are treated as developmental rather than evaluative, they are more likely to extend beyond their current linguistic comfort zones. This has important implications for instructional design, particularly in programs preparing future language teachers who will later shape similar environments for their own students.

The prominence of peer mediation further complicates traditional views of teacher-centered scaffolding. While instructor feedback remains essential, the findings suggest that learning is often co-constructed through informal, learner-driven interactions. These interactions may be especially valuable in contexts where learners share similar linguistic and professional trajectories, as is the case in teacher education programs. Recognizing and legitimizing peer mediation can therefore enhance both pedagogical effectiveness and learner autonomy.

Moreover, the identity-oriented nature of reflective writing underscores the need to view language development and professional formation as inseparable processes. As students articulated their evolving beliefs about teaching and learning, they simultaneously refined their ability to express complex, abstract ideas in the target language. This integration challenges narrow skill-based models of assessment and supports more holistic approaches that value reflection as evidence of both linguistic and pedagogical growth.

Taken together, these insights extend the study's contributions beyond immediate classroom practices to broader discussions in applied linguistics and teacher education. They suggest that reflective, interaction-rich learning environments not only support language acquisition but also foster the kinds of reflective dispositions essential for sustainable professional development.

Conclusion. Explicit grammar instruction remains deeply embedded in English language education due to its symbolic value, institutional alignment, and practical utility. While it can support accuracy and learner confidence, its pedagogical impact is limited when treated as an isolated instructional objective. Reconceptualizing grammar as a flexible, context-sensitive resource integrated into communicative practice allows educators to balance accuracy and fluency more effectively. Teacher

¹⁸ Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

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education programs should therefore emphasize reflective, adaptive approaches to grammar instruction that acknowledge contextual constraints while prioritizing meaningful language use. Future research should explore longitudinal outcomes of integrated approaches and examine how institutional structures shape pedagogical decision-making.

Beyond reaffirming the pedagogical limitations of isolated explicit grammar instruction, this study highlights the need for a broader reconceptualization of instructional priorities within English language education. Grammar, when positioned as an end in itself, risks narrowing learners' engagement with language to accuracy-driven performance rather than meaningful communication. However, when treated as a dynamic resource that supports interpretation, interaction, and expression, grammar can contribute to more holistic language development.

Importantly, the findings suggest that the debate surrounding explicit grammar instruction should move beyond polarized positions that frame grammar as either essential or obsolete. Instead, the focus should shift toward understanding how, when, and why grammar is pedagogically mobilized in specific contexts. Such an approach recognizes the complexity of classroom realities, where teachers must balance theoretical principles, learner expectations, curricular mandates, and assessment pressures.

This study also underscores the central role of teacher cognition in shaping instructional practice. Teachers' decisions regarding grammar instruction were influenced not only by their theoretical knowledge but also by institutional norms, prior learning experiences, and perceptions of learner needs. Consequently, pedagogical change cannot rely solely on methodological innovation; it must also address the structural and ideological conditions that sustain grammar-centered instruction.

From a practical standpoint, the findings call for teacher education programs to place greater emphasis on reflective decision-making rather than prescriptive methodological models. Future teachers should be equipped to critically evaluate when explicit grammar instruction serves communicative goals and when it functions primarily as a symbolic or administrative tool. Developing this pedagogical sensitivity may allow educators to integrate grammar more flexibly and meaningfully within communicative curricula.

Finally, the study points to directions for future research. Longitudinal investigations examining how integrated grammar instruction influences communicative development over time would provide valuable insight into its sustained impact. Further research might also explore learner perspectives, particularly how students interpret the role of grammar in their own language development. Such work would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of grammar instruction as a situated, socially mediated practice rather than a purely technical pedagogical choice.

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