

## **Omani EFL Students' Preference of Grammar Teaching Method**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore Omani EFL students' preference of grammar teaching method and their reasons for their preference. The two popular grammar teaching methods that are prevalent in EFL Oman are deductive grammar teaching and inductive grammar teaching. In the deductive approach grammar rules are explicitly given at the beginning of the learning process while in inductive approach examples containing grammar items are given to the learners and asked them to discover rules (Thornbury, 1999). Sixty-five fifth and sixth semester English language and literature graduate students from the Department of English, Al Buraimi University College, Oman participated in the study. The data was collected through an open ended questionnaire. The findings show that most students prefer deductive grammar teaching because it is an easy method for learning complex grammar and effective method for learning new grammar items; furthermore, deductive grammar teaching gives the students' confidence and better practice, saves their time and enables them to remember grammar rules and apply them in new learning situations. The students who preferred inductive method attributed critical thinking skill, independent learning, long term memory and active learning to it.

**Key words:** Omani EFL students, grammar, teaching, deductive, inductive, learners' preference

## 1. Introduction

Grammar plays a key role in most English as a Second Language (ESL)/ English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning contexts although communicative approach is accepted widely. The teachers use either deductive grammar teaching method or inductive grammar teaching method in their classrooms. Although, there are a number of studies conducted to find out students' preference of grammar teaching approaches (DeKeyser, 1995; Male, 2011; A. V. Brown, 2009; Landolsi, 2011), a few studies have been conducted in EFL Omani context and they are done either in schools (Al-Kalbani, 2004) or with pre-service teacher trainees (Nagaratnam & Al-Mekhlafi, 2012). There has been no study that addressed Omani graduate students' preference of grammar teaching to the researcher's knowledge. This study tries to fill this gap.

## 2. Grammar and Grammar Teaching

Grammar is an important component of English language learning. According to H. D. Brown (2007) language is chaotic and unintelligible without grammar. Similarly, Nunan (1991) argues that learners cannot communicate well if they do not know the basic grammar. Hinkel and Fotos (2002) observed that even though there is no unanimous view on grammar teaching, it is one of the pillars of English language teaching. Grammar teaching has been recognized as an essential and unavoidable aspect in language learning (Doughty & Williams 1998). Although Communicative Language Teaching has reduced the amount of grammar taught in ESL/EFL classrooms, it is still believed that English language teaching is centered on grammar (Nassaji and Fotos, 2004). Recent research has demonstrated that grammar teaching is both necessary and essential because grammar knowledge influences learners' skill in using target language to communicate effectively (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Ellis 2002). In other words, grammar has always occupied a central position in English language teaching; furthermore, the two prominent grammar teaching approaches are inductive and deductive grammar teaching.

### 2.1. Deductive Teaching Method

Deductive method is based on deductive logic. Therefore, it begins by studying grammar rules directly and moves to the specific examples that illustrate those rules. According to Decoo

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(1996) deductive learning is the process of going “from the general to the specific, from consciously formulated rules to the application in language use” (p. 96). Deductive grammar teaching is a rule based explicit grammar teaching where learners receive the rules directly from the teacher before they know the functions (Cowan, 2008). Krashen (2002) has pointed out that deductive method is related to conscious learning because it teaches rules explicitly and stresses error correction. Widodo (2006) relates deductive approach to Krashen’s (1987, 2002) learning and acquisition hypothesis and concludes that it is an explicit formal teaching. Gollin (1998) associates deductive method with Grammar-Translation Approach.

Deductive approach is a direct, easy and fast method of teaching grammar rules. Van Patten and Borst (2012) argue that explicit prior knowledge of rules help learners to process the input accurately and much faster. It is suitable for adult learners as H. D. Brown (2001) points out that most adults “need to have the language system laid out explicitly with rules from which they can work deductively” (p. 147). Sallas, Matthews, Lane and Sun (2007) observe that the learners “whose underlying structure is relatively explicit and salient are typically learned better with guided instruction than relatively unguided discovery learning” (p. 2132). Deductive approach may be more appropriate to the learners whose time and knowledge are limited (Szkolne, 2005). According to Fortune (1992) deductive method is still used in language teaching classroom around the world and dominates in many course books and grammar books. Nevertheless, deductive approach is not appropriate to all types of learners. For example, it may not be suitable for young learners since grammar explanation contains indigestible technical jargons. According to Hedge (2000) in deductive teaching the teacher is the authority and the source of information meanwhile students are “passive recipients” (p. 82) of the given information. There is no learner involvement since it is a teacher fronted teaching style of grammar teaching (Widodo, 2006; Chalipa, 2013). Furthermore, deductive approach neglects meaning for the sake of forms and promotes passive learning (Shaffer, 1989).

## **2.2. Inductive Teaching Method**

Inductive learning starts with analyzing specific grammar examples to identify the general grammar rules. Carr (2009) claims that induction is “a form of reasoning in which one arrives at general principles or laws by generalizing over specific cases” (p. 47). According to

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Krashen (2002) inductive learning is related to subconscious learning. Ellis (2010) points out that “Inductive explicit instruction provides learners with the data and guidance that they need to derive their own understanding of the grammatical feature” (p. 4). Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (1993) defined inductive approach as an approach which doesn’t involve any direct rules teaching, but require learners to discover rules from their experience of using language. Nunan (2003) states that in inductive method the learners discover rules from given examples through guided discovery. Similarly Prince and Felder (2006) observe that the learners find out rules from the given data with teachers’ guidance and help. Rivers and Temperley (1978) point out that the teachers’ main responsibility is to provide meaningful learning contexts in which rules are exemplified and the learners infer rules from the given examples. According to Krashen (1982) inductive teaching is an explicit grammar teaching since it raises the learner’s consciousness on language forms whereas Schmidt (1990) observes that learners learn implicitly and unintentionally without any awareness of what is being learned. In fact, inductive teaching can be done either explicitly or implicitly as Dekeyser (2003) claims that “When students are encouraged to find rules for themselves by studying examples in a text, learning is inductive and explicit. When children acquire linguistic competence of their native language without thinking about its structure, their learning is inductive and implicit” (p. 315).

Inductive method promotes learner autonomy since it allows the learners to “perceive and formulate the underlying governing patterns presented in meaningful context” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 395). It makes the learner active as Herron and Tomasello (1992) concluded after a study that inductive method was better than the deductive because students got engaged in hypothesis testing actively and immediate feedback on their learning. Inductive approach is useful for teaching complex structures that are “difficult to articulate and internalize” (Larsen-Freeman, 2009, p. 528). Inductive method replicates L1 acquisition. To demonstrate, H. D. Brown (2001) claims that inductive learning is similar to subconscious L1 acquisition which motivates and engages the learners to discover rules and helps them to “get a communicative ‘feel’ for some aspects of language”(p. 365). In spite of these, inductive teaching may lead learners to wrong conclusion (Szkolne, 2005). It wastes time in the process of rule discovery since it takes a lot of unnecessary effort to discover rules though it brings about greater learning (Brendse, 2012).

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Furthermore, inductive grammar teaching is frustrating to some learners because it may be against the learners who have different past learning experience (Widodo, 2006; Chalipa, 2013).

### 3. Previous Studies

There have been a number of studies that investigated both the teachers and students' attitudes towards grammar and grammar teaching and their preference of grammar teaching methods. DeKeyser (1995) conducted a study and reported that meaning based teaching that provided explicit grammar explanation was preferred. Male (2011) carried out a mixed study to investigate students' attitude towards grammar and grammar teaching and found that the students believed grammar was important in learning English and they preferred explicit grammar teaching. Scarcella (1996) stressed form-focused instruction and corrective feedback. Ebsworth and Schweers (1997) conducted a study and showed us that the teachers believed that grammar teaching helped the learners whose aim was to develop good academic and business English and achieve high accurate English. Schulz's (2001) comparative study between US and Columbia demonstrate that 80% of the US students believed that grammar learning was important for mastering English whereas 64% of the teachers believed so. While 76% of the Colombian students preferred grammar, only 30% of the teachers felt so. Moreover, the Colombian students preferred explicit grammar teaching more than the US students did. Wang (1999) carried out a study to find out students and teachers' attitudes towards grammar instruction in Taiwan and found that the students and the most of the teachers preferred the explicit grammar teaching method. A. V. Brown (2009) surveyed both teachers and students' perception of effective teacher practices and reported that students preferred a grammar based teaching while the teachers favoured communicative language teaching.

Ismail (2010) studied forty female ESP students from UAE University to investigate their perception on grammar learning using a questionnaire, classroom observation notes and semi-structured interviews. The results demonstrated that students believed that explicit grammar teaching was useful for learning grammar. Landolsi (2011) investigated students and teachers' perception on grammar teaching in UAE universities using questionnaire and interviews and discovered that the teachers believed that grammar was important for learners to learn English and the students viewed grammar teaching as essential in learning English. Al-Kalbani (2004)

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surveyed the perceptions of EFL school teachers and students from three different geographical regions in Oman and discovered that the students preferred explicit instruction whereas teachers preferred implicit instruction. Nagaratnam and Al-Mekhlafi (2012) examined pre-service teacher trainees' attitudes towards the grammar teaching method and found that they had positive attitude towards grammar teaching and preferred implicit grammar teaching. The available literature reveals that there is no study that has investigated the undergraduate learners' preference of grammar teaching method in EFL Oman context. Therefore, this study focuses on this missing gap in the literature.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore Omani EFL undergraduate students' preference of grammar teaching method and their reasons for their choice. This study will contribute to the literature related to English language teaching in general and grammar teaching in particular. The findings of this study will demonstrate that it is important to understand the learners' preference of grammar teaching so that the teachers will be able to choose the method that is appropriate to their learners.

#### **4. Methods**

This is a qualitative study because “the researcher collects open ended, emerging data with the primary intent of developing themes from the data” (Creswell, 2003, p.18) and “Qualitative research is empirical research where the data are not in the form of numbers” (Punch, 2009, p. 3). Qualitative research is naturalistic studying people, things and events in natural contexts.

##### **4.1. Context and Participants**

This study was done in Al Buraimi University College Oman, a private college, affiliated to California State University, Northridge-USA, and under the direct supervision of ministry of higher education Oman. The participants were 65 fifth and sixth semester English language major students from the Department of English. They were studying Communicative Grammar and also studied different grammar courses like Basic Grammar and Introduction to Modern Grammar.

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An open ended questionnaire was used to collect the data for this study since open- ended questions are asked to collect information “to be analyzed for its content” (J. D. Brown, 2009, p. 202) and people are asked to give their opinion, feeling and evaluation (Wellington, 2000).

The open ended questionnaire was analyzed thematically. Since the data was primarily “textual data”, it employed “interpretative analysis” (Croker, 2009, p. 5). Different levels of analysis were done by “moving deeper and deeper into understanding the, data and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2003, p. 190). This study uses qualitative data analysis frame work given by Miles and Huberman (1994); therefore, the data went through these four stages: data reduction, data display, data conclusion and data verification.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

The open ended questionnaire was analyzed thematically to explore the students’ preference for grammar teaching method and the reasons for their preference. According to the survey analysis 48 students (72.85%) out of 65 preferred deductive grammar teaching method whereas 17 students (26.15%) were infavour of inductive method.

### **5.1. Reasons for Deductive Teaching**

The students preferred deductive grammar teaching method because it is easy for them to learn complex grammar and gives them confidence while practicing grammar. Since deductive method teaches grammar directly, it saves their time, helps the students to remember grammar rules and enable them to apply the learned rules in new situations. Furthermore, deductive method can be an effective method for learning new grammar items.

#### **5.1.1. Simplifies Complex Grammar**

According to the questionnaire since teachers teach grammar rules directly with appropriate examples illustrating difficult grammar and give the students give the students carefully and specifically designed practice for using the rules, deductive method simplifies

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complex and difficult grammar and removes the confusion associated with it. Since the students don't understand grammar from the examples, they need explicit teaching. The students who participated in the study mentioned:

“Method 1 is useful as well where there are a lot of difficult grammar that will get confused with it.”

“When the teacher demonstrates the rules of difficult grammar to their students and then gives activity... they will understand the rules very well.”

“Some of students can't understand difficult rules by the examples only.”

### **5.1.2. Easy to Comprehend**

The students who preferred deductive method believe that the teachers' direct explanation and their examples illustrating the rules make grammar easy for them to understand clearly. Furthermore, since the rules are given directly, the students don't have to struggle to find them out from the examples. In the open-ended questionnaire the students wrote:

“It will be more easy for students to understand grammar rules rather than method 2. It is more clear.”

“The first method because this method can make me understanding the rules in correct way so the rules will be very clear in my mind and very easy when I want to study for the exam.”

“Also each rule which holding by examples or supporting sentences they become very clear.”

### **5.1.3. Effective Method in Teaching New Grammar Items**

Deductive method is very effective and successful for learning new grammar rules because teachers teach them systematically by providing complete background of the rules. Moreover, the prior knowledge of grammar rules will make learning new grammar items easier



as the students can follow the rules systematically and the teachers can clear the students' doubts while practice using new grammar items. The participants commented:

“This method is so effective especially when we learn new grammar rules.”

“Also the better teach grammar rules for students because he gives background about new rules.”

“Method 1 is the best because student would be able to ask if they have any doubt in understanding... it's easy to have a rule and follow it in learning something new.”

#### **5.1.4. Minimise Mistakes and Confusion**

The students believe that direct grammar teaching reduces the students' mistakes and removes their confusion because the students know what is correct and what is not correct. The students can identify their own mistakes and the teachers can correct the students' errors whenever they make. On the contrary, the students may go wrong while discovering rules from the given examples; furthermore, the wrong rules will remain with them for ever. The students viewed:

“There will be a rule to follow and discover the mistakes.”

“This method helps students from making errors or to avoid errors.”

“First he will give us a correct way to know the rules of grammar and then we try to do practice...the teacher try to explain what wrong with them if we do it in wrong way.”

“When I start with example may be I make mistake to figure out the rule, so the first understanding will stay in my mind all the time even if the teacher explain it later. That is mean I will keep the wrong understanding in my mind.”

“I like the direct one because I think if the teacher gives examples first then discover the rules that make the students confused.”

#### **5.1.5. Gives Confidence and Motivates Students**

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The participants think that deductive grammar teaching method makes them confident since they know the rules and what they are supposed to do during practice. Prior grammar knowledge enhances the students' motivation as they can try applying the learned items. In the questionnaire the participants expressed:

“I prefer method 1 because first we need to know everything about the rules in order to be confident.”

“When I understand rules first I have confidence.”

“We feel motivation to study a lot of rules and give a lot of examples.”

#### **5.1.6. Typical Method in Grammar Teaching**

The students consider deductive method as the typical grammar teaching method because it follows the natural order of learning i.e. knowledge before practice. Rules first will enhance the students' understanding the examples well and will give them better practice.

“Because we should to understand the rule in the first, after that we learn the examples.”

“In my opinion, practicing after full understanding is good way to make sure that your students understand the rule.”

#### **5.1.7. Saves Time**

Deductive teaching saves both the teachers and the students' time as it doesn't require much time for teacher preparation and the students don't have to trouble discovering rules from the given examples. One of the students wrote “In this way we can understand the rules in a few time.” Another student wrote “I like method 1 because when the teacher explains grammar rules first, it makes the students understand early and he or she saves time.”

#### **5.1.8. Easy to Remember**

The students can easily remember and recollect directly taught grammar rules and even the examples illustrating those rules. The students viewed:

“Method 1 because that is easy to me to remember the rule and apply them to new example.”

“I prefer the first method. This method makes me memorize the rule clearly and understand it well.”

“Also the rule will help us to give any example about the rule and to keep that example in our mind.”

### **5.1.9. Provides Better Practice**

Understanding grammar rules and the examples illustrating those rules before practicing grammar makes the practice easier and useful as they know what to do and it removes the students’ confusion during the practice. The students who participated in the survey wrote:

“If we understand the rule we can deal with the example without any confuse.”

“Because I understand the rules, I can solve the practice.”

“Then, after getting the lesson I know what I am supposed to do with examples.”

“Since I know what I have to do, it helps me to understand the practice well.”

“I like to understand first then I test my understanding by doing practice.”

### **5.1.10. Applicable in New Context**

They prefer deductive grammar teaching method because it helps them to apply the learned grammar rules in new and real life communicative contexts. They can use the learned rules to construct their own sentences. Furthermore, the deductive grammar teaching method can improve their receptive and productive language skills as well. To demonstrate this, some of the students mentioned:

“I understand the practice and have the ability to give examples.”

“After understand the rules, I can give examples myself.”

“Method 1 the student will memorize it and will apply it in his life.”

“I can apply in my life through the communication.”

“Having the examples after understanding the rule is better in remember it later and use it our lives.”

“And that helps the student when they speaking.”

“In addition, the comprehension skills will be good.”

#### **5.1.11. Reasons for Inductive Teaching**

According to the questionnaire, 17 students preferred inductive teaching method because it helps them to understand grammar well, promotes critical thinking skill and independent learning, develop long term memory and encourages active learning

#### **5.1.12. Provides Better Understanding**

The students who preferred inductive grammar teaching method believe that they understand and learn grammar better by discovering rules. Inductive grammar teaching improves students’ grammar knowledge considerably since it is the result of the students’ own personal effort. The students stated:

“I like the second method, because for me it’s more clear and help me to understand the rule... Starting with examples is more better than starting with given rule first.”

“Method 2 because when we discover something that will be more useful which mean we can understand it easily than give us the lesson directly.”

#### **5.1.13. Promotes Critical Thinking Skill and Independent Learning**

According to the students, inductive grammar teaching forces them to think and discover rules from the given examples. As a result, it promotes critical thinking and independent learning. Furthermore, the learners can identify their mistakes when the teacher explains later

and even they can evaluate their own skill in using grammar. For example, the students explained:

“Method 2 is more effective which make students think and discover.”

“I prefer the second method because students will use their mind to draw and know true rule of grammar.”

“Useful for their mind. Make them think.”

“Also it gives the chance for the students to evaluate his/ her ability in grammar rules.”

“The students depend on themselves. They can know their mistakes after the teacher explains the rules for them at the end.”

#### **5.1.14. Develops Active Learning**

The students believe that inductive teaching involves and engages them in the process of learning grammar. In other words, inductive teaching encourages active learning since it ensures students’ active participation in the process of grammar learning. For instance, one of the students wrote “Method 2 because this method is good... to them do practice also participation.”

#### **5.1.15. Enhances Students’ Concentration**

The students believe that inductive method enhances students’ concentration as it forces them to focus on examples to infer rules. According to one student, “Also, students will be able to focus on understanding the examples and this will help them in constructing the rules.” Another student wrote “Make students focus on the material.”

#### **5.1.16. Better Memory Retention**

The students believe that inductive method helps them to retain the learned grammar longer. Since they discover rules, they will not forget them easily. Some of the participants wrote:

“Because it helps students to remember the rules and after they figure it out through studying the examples, they will not forget easily.”

“It helps to stick the rule in my mind.”

“For me I like to teach me by using method to remember the lesson always.”

“Because when I work out to find the rule, I will never forget the structure of the rules. Moreover, I work hard to find out these rules, so it will stick in my mind forever.”

This study demonstrates that most of the students preferred deductive grammar teaching method. The findings of this study go with the findings of some previous studies and confirm the views of some scholars. First of all it goes with Van Patten and Borst (2012) who argue that explicit prior knowledge of rules help learners to process the input accurately and much faster than if the learners are not given explicit knowledge of grammar. Secondly it matches with H. D. Brown (2001) who claims that learners need rules to start with. Thirdly it confirms that deductive approach may be more appropriate with the learners who have limited time and knowledge (Szkolne (2005). Fourth, this study is parallel to Krashen’s (2002) claim that deductive method stresses error corrections and presenting rules explicitly. Fifth, the study agrees that inductive method develops critical thinking and promotes independent learning as it gets the learners to discover rules (Shaffer1989). Sixth, the study confirms Herron and Tomasello’s (1992) conclusion that inductive method makes learners active. Seventh, this study agrees with Brendse (2012) who view that inductive method leads to achieve greater learning outcome and wastes students’ time. Lastly, it confirms Szkolne’s (2005) view that learners may arrive at wrong conclusion through self-discovery.

## 6. Conclusion

According to deductive approach learners should learn grammar rules prior to examples and practice the rules whereas inductive method asks the learners to study specific examples to identify general rules form them. The teachers use either deductive or inductive grammar teaching method to teach grammar. This qualitative study attempted to investigate Omani EFL undergraduate students’ preference of grammar teaching method. The open ended survey

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questionnaire result indicates that the majority of the students prefer deductive approach because it is useful to teach them complex grammar, effective grammar teaching method for teaching new grammar rules, gives confidence to students and motivates them. The students can learn grammar easily; they can memorize the rules easily and apply the learned rules and structures in new situations. Furthermore; deductive method gives the students better practice and saves their time. Those who preferred inductive method believe that inductive teaching promotes independent learning, develop learners' critical thinking, helps the students to remember grammar for long time and makes them active learner.

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## Appendix

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## Survey Questionnaire

### Instruction

Read the two extracts about two different grammar teaching method and then choose the method that you like by giving your reason for your choice.

#### Method1

First the teacher explains grammar rules to you, and then he gives practice. After understanding the rules, you apply them in the new examples.

#### Method2

First the teacher gives examples that contain grammar rules. Then you study these examples and discover the rules from them.

Which grammar teaching method do you prefer? Why?

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Omani EFL Students' Preference of Grammar Teaching Method