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Students' difficulties in learning English for specific purpose grammar at the People's Police University

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated grammatical difficulties encountered by students of the People's Police University while learning grammar in ESP courses. The design included questionnaires to teachers and students, and classroom participant observations. The findings indicated that the student respondents only perceived four target features to be difficult to learn. The results also showed that the students' perceptions of grammatical difficulty were influenced by several factors including the inherent complexity of rules, L1 transfer, students' differences in language aptitude, students' infrequency of practice, and teaching methodology. The findings will hopefully be useful for teachers and researchers with an interest in this line of research.

Key words: *grammatical features, perceived, ESP grammar.*

1. Introduction

The value of grammar instruction has been argued by numerous researchers involved in the field of language teaching. In fact, no other issue has so preoccupied theorists and practitioners as the grammar debate, and the history of language teaching is essentially the history of the claims and counterclaims for and against the teaching of grammar (Thornbury, 2004). In the early twentieth century, priority was given to grammar

teaching with the belief being that if one knew the grammatical rules of the language, he would be able to use it for communication. However, this was called into question in the early 1970s when it was thought that to be considered a competent user of a language, one needed to know not only the rules of grammar, but also how they were applied in real communication. Consequently, grammar teaching became less prominent, and in some cases, was abandoned altogether during this period. In recent years, a growing concern about the accuracy of learners' language has resulted in a reassertion of the role of grammar in syllabus design and lesson content, and even in giving explicit attention to grammatical forms and rules (Ellis, 1993c quoted in Hedge, 2000). It is clear from this brief history of language teaching that grammar teaching has played such a crucial role in language instruction that it cannot be neglected as Bowen and Marks (1994) say, "Grammar organizes language structures and makes a language understandable for a learner". Foreign language teaching in Vietnam, particularly English language teaching, has long been considered to be grammar-focused. It can be inferred from this that teaching grammar has always been central to foreign language instruction.

Regarding learning English grammar, some students like it and try to master it because they find it interesting and think of it as a tool to facilitate the learning of vocabulary and other language skills such as speaking and writing. In contrast, other students believe that learning English grammar is boring and complicated. Very often, learners think of grammar as an unpopular and difficult part of their language lessons. Even more worrying is that they usually acquired that attitude from their teachers (Lewis & Hill, 1985). In fact, teachers at the People's Police University (PPU) have paid much more attention to teaching grammar than any other language skills in the ESP courses. This is mainly due to the final examination being mainly grammar-based with their students' pass rate acting as an indicator of the teachers' success. As a result, for PPU students, learning English is synonymous with learning its grammar. Therefore, when learning English, they focus chiefly on grasping its grammar. However, they have not been particularly successful in mastering it. They still have difficulty distinguishing between and memorizing grammar structures, so they often speak or write ungrammatically. All of above reasons inspired the authors to conduct this study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Grammar and its place in foreign language teaching

Grammar instruction has always received a great deal of attention from people whose interests lie in linguistics and language teaching and learning. According to Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988:1), "of the many issues surrounding the teaching of grammar, perhaps the most controversial is whether to teach it at all". From a historical

perspective, this controversy should come as somewhat of a surprise: teaching grammar has been central to and often synonymous with teaching foreign language for the past 2,500 years (Rutherford, 1987 quoted in Celce-Murcia and Hilles, 1988). However, the 1980s saw the advent of an anti-grammar movement, perhaps inspired primarily by Krashen's (1987) idea that grammar can be acquired naturally from meaningful input and opportunities to interact in the classroom (Hedge, 2000).

According to Batstone (1994), grammar is divided into product (the component parts or rules that makes up the language) and process (the ways in which grammar is deployed from moment to moment in communication). Clearly, Batstone's view of grammar not only concerns the syntactic rules but also the rules of use.

Richards, Platt, and Platt (1992) write in their Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics: "Grammar is a description of the structure of a language and the way in which linguistic units such as words and phrases are combined to produce sentences in the language. It usually takes into account the meanings and functions these sentences have in overall system of the language. It may or may not include the description of the sound of a language."

The researcher favors Richards, Platt, and Platt's (1992) definition of grammar. Because, in this definition, grammar is viewed as descriptive, which refers to the structure of a language as it is actually used by speakers and writers. Furthermore, the definition indicates both linguistic and social features of grammar as it refers not only to rules to form correct sentences but also to the meanings and functions of those sentences in the language, which is essential for foreign language teaching and learning.

2.2. Grammar in ESP learning

It is certain that grammar has important roles in some aspects of ESP learning. Ellis, R. (2005) provides ten general principles for successful instructed learning, among which the first principle is that instruction needs to ensure that learners develop both rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence. According to Ellis R. (2005), proficiency in ESP requires that learners acquire both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions, which caters to fluency in ESP communication, and a rule-based competence consisting of knowledge of specific grammatical rules, which facilitates complexity and accuracy in ESP communication.

Zhaojun Chen (2016) states that grammar can generally play two parts in ESP learning. One is to enhance comprehensible input and the other is to monitor effective output. The first part means that learners use grammar knowledge they have learned to solve some puzzles in ESP reading comprehension. When learners cannot understand the

meaning of a complicated sentence, they need to analyse the sentence structure, the functions and interrelation of sentence components in order to comprehend the sentence. To monitor effective output means monitoring their oral or written expressions. Many learners have learned English and ESP for several years, but they would make some mistakes in the oral or written expressions. It shows that they have not made the best use of their mastered knowledge to monitor and adjust the ESP learning output. Therefore, in terms of grammar learning, ESP learners' grammar competence is cultivated through learning procedural and declarative knowledge. In summary, learning grammar cannot only help ESP learners construct more accurate sentences but also help them use various structures to communicate in real-life situations.

2.3. Studies on difficulties in learning and teaching grammar

Although “difficulty” or “grammatical difficulty” is difficult to define, the term is widely used in situations involving foreign/second language learning. Second Language acquisition (SLA) literature reveals various approaches to defining “grammatical difficulty”. Krashen (1982) put forward the intuitively appealing idea of “*easy rule*” and “*hard rule*”, but failed to make the distinction explicit. On the other hand, Green and Hecht (1992) differentiated easy rules from hard ones by the extent to which the rules can be made. Meanwhile, DeKeyser and Sokaiski (1996) considered grammatical difficulty in relation to *comprehension* and *production*. They claimed that some grammar structures are easy to comprehend, but difficult to produce, whereas others are easy to produce, but difficult to comprehend.

With regard to grammatical difficulty at the level of explicit knowledge, R. Ellis (2006b) proposed the following, all of which, as he acknowledged, are in need of empirical verification.

- (1) Grammar features that are formally and/or functionally simple are easier to learn than those that are formally and/or functionally complex.
- (2) “Rule-based” grammar features are easier to learn than “item-based” grammar features.
- (3) Grammar features with simple pedagogical rules (e.g., the use of third person -s) are easier to learn than those with relative complex pedagogical rules (e.g., the choice of articles).
- (4) Grammar rules specifying the prototypical function of a form are easier to learn than those specifying the peripheral function of the form.
- (5) Grammar rules that can be formulated with less extensive use of metalanguage are easier to learn than those that need more extensive use of metalanguage.

In Vietnam, many researchers, linguists, English lecturers and learners have discussed the teaching in learning of English grammar in EFL classes. However, only a few of them have focused on grammatical difficulty as a matter of concern. Ha (2011), for example, found some factors which influenced grammar learning of in-service students of English at her educational institution. These factors can be named as the lack of matching the meaning of English structures to their equivalents in Vietnamese language, students' low frequency of practice, or inappropriateness of syllabus and materials. Besides, the learners' different language aptitude was another factor discussed in her research. Meanwhile, Hanh (2008) suggested that *L1 transfer* (negative transfer) was one of the most common factors to in relation to which grammatical difficulty is discussed.

It can be seen that grammatical difficulty is the matter that has been explored and discussed from various perspectives in the field of SLA and FLT, and each of the conceptualizations of grammatical difficulty has its own strengths and limitations. However, one message from these researchers is certain and clear: grammar learning is a complex phenomenon and more research on the issue of grammatical difficulty will contribute to our understanding of it. Despite the availability of a number of accounts of grammatical difficulty, and regardless of whether they are linguistic or psycholinguistic in nature, they are all "objective" accounts proposed by L2 theorists or researchers. Little research has been conducted into the issue of grammatical difficulty from the learner's perspective in ESL/EFL classrooms, especially in an ESP classroom. This study is hopefully an attempt to investigate the issue of grammatical difficulty from the perspective of ESP learners at the PPU. Especially, it investigates which grammatical features the learners perceive as easier, and which as more difficult, to learn; and what influences their perceptions of grammatical difficulty based on the theoretical factors (1) *inherent complexity of grammar rules*, (2) *L1 [negative] transfer*, (3) *individual differences in language aptitude*, and (4) *students' low frequency of practice*.

3. Research methodology

Research questions: The specific questions motivating this study are: (1) Which features of English grammar do students perceive as easier, and which as more difficult, to learn in an ESP course? (2) What influences the learners' perceptions of grammatical difficulty?

Sample of the study: 104 students of PPU's D26S were drawn from two classes who took part in the ESP course in the first semester of the 2018-2019 school year and a group of 13 teachers, including 9 males and 4 females, who have been teaching ESP in general and grammar in ESP in particular to ESP classes at the PPU for 5 to 17 years.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Research Question 1

The quantitative data from the questionnaire and the ranking activity were analyzed to address the research question 1. Because the total number of respondents was not so many, we decided to do the data collecting and analyzing procedures manually. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, expert opinion was sought. This was obtained through consultations with our colleagues. Based on their comments and suggestions, the questionnaire was revised several times before it was piloted. And all the data and statistics was tabulated and calculated twice. Any discrepancies found were double checked.

To determine students' perceptions of the grammatical difficulty of the 12 features represented by the closed-ended items, they were ranked in ascending order based on the value or their mean scores in the following table:

TABLE 1. The grammar features' difficulty ranking

Items	Total answers	Mean scores
Past simple -ed	104	1.22
'so that' clause	104	1.39
Past continuous	104	1.42
In order + to infinitive	104	1.71
Participles as adjectives	104	1.77
Adjective comparative	104	2.02
Adjective superlative	104	2.12
Participles phrases	104	2.93
Passive voice	104	3.12
Embedded questions	104	3.20
Relative clauses	104	3.30
Reported speech	104	3.44

Looking at the mean scores, we see that 8 out of the 12 items have a mean score below the averaged mean of 3 (on a continuum from 1 to 6), while the four remaining items have a mean score of around 3. The lowest mean score of the 12 items is 1.22, and the highest is 3.44. According to the student respondents, the easiest grammatical feature is the simple past -ED while the most difficult one is Reported Speech. These results are more or less in line with the researcher's hypothesis for the three grammar points that students often face difficulty when studying grammar in ESP courses including the passive voice, reported speech, and relative clause.

The results for the difficulty ranking section of the questionnaire were also cross-validated by the latter part of the questionnaire containing the three reflective questions with the following results:

TABLE 2. The reflective grammar features’ difficulty ranking

Items	Total answers	not at all difficult		a little bit difficult		difficult		very difficult	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Passive voice	104	0	0	43	41.3	61	58.7	0	0
Reported speech	104	0	0	14	13.5	89	85.5	1	1
Relative Clause	104	0	0	30	28.8	74	71.2	0	0

The statistics show that the student respondents tend to perceive learning of the 12 target features of ESP courses to be easy except for 4 features including the passive voice, reported speech, relative clauses and embedded question. But they all agreed that these four grammar features were not too difficult to learn.

In the explanations for their choices, most of them wrote that the passive voice is, for example, considered to be more difficult to learn than other features due to its complex grammatical rules of thumb. They complained that too many rules needed to be memorized in order to arrive at the correct form of past participle constructions. That was just one of the reasons mentioned.

However, according to the statistics, although some of the target features were perceived as more difficult to learn than others in terms of grammar rules, the students still perceived several target features to be relatively easy to learn such as the past simple -ED, or ‘so that’ clause.

4.2. Research Question 2

Four themes pertinent to students’ perceptions of grammatical difficulty were identified during the literature review including: (1) *inherent complexity of grammar rules*, (2) *L1 [negative] transfer*, (3) *individual differences in language aptitude*, and (4) *students’ low frequency of practice*. Furthermore, an extremely important factor that influences the students’ perceptions of grammatical difficulty that cannot be omitted is the teaching methodology. These are discussed as follows:

The inherent complexity of grammar rules:

When learning a grammar feature, three main aspects of knowledge appear for students to absorb. (DeKeyser, 2005)

Knowledge of syntactic constituents refers to the knowledge of syntactic aspects of a grammar feature. It is obvious that a feature with simple grammatical rules of thumb is considered less difficult to learn than a feature with complex rules. The above-mentioned statistics bear this out. The majority of 104 students rated the past continuous tense is easy to learn ($m=1.42$) because formulation of this feature requires a simple thumb of rule '*the past continuous is composed of only auxiliary be and the present participle*'. The feature 'in order + to infinitive' was perceived to be an easy feature because '*it has only one simple grammatical rule of thumb – that is using to infinitive of verb after in order.*' Students also noted that the simple past -ED, 'so that' clause, or participles as adjectives are easy to learn for the same reason.

Conversely, many of the 104 student respondents considered the passive voice more difficult to learn due to its complex grammatical rule. Although its syntactic constituents appear quite simple in that '*the passive is composed of only auxiliary be and the past participle*', students need to know the rules for changing active sentences into passive ones. Students also need to know the rules determining when to omit the agent, and many rules need to be memorized to arrive at the correct form of participle construction.

Students' perception of difficulty is the same for reported speech and relative clause. Too many aspects involved in the sentence building with these features make them difficult to learn.

Knowledge of semantics refers to units of information concerning the semantic aspects of a grammar feature. Students do not always understand the cause-effect relationship in a real conditional sentence or the before and after relationship in using participle phrases. That is why they consider participle phrases to be somewhat difficult to learn ($m=2.93$).

Knowledge of pragmatics is associated with when and why to use a grammar feature. Many students reported that they are not always clear to write a sentence in active or passive voice although the construction of passive is simple. That is why they sometimes use the passive incorrectly.

In summary, students encounter difficulties when learning English grammar features due to their inherent complexity of their rules. Although the three aspects of syntactic constituents, semantics and pragmatics all contribute to students' perceptions of grammatical difficulty, it was observed that the 'knowledge of syntactic constituents' factor appears to be the most influential.

L1 [negative] transfer:

Responses to Question 9 (for students) and Question 3 (for teachers) which attempts to look for whether Vietnamese language has any influence on English grammar learning is quite various as follows:

The most noticeable point is that the teachers and students have quite contrasting views on the influence of Vietnamese in EFL or ESP classes. A larger part of the teacher respondents (53.8%) believe that using Vietnamese in EFL classrooms in general and grammar instruction in particular comes with more disadvantages than advantages. In direct contrast, 41 out of the 104 student respondents (accounting for 41%) assume that there are advantages to use the Vietnamese language when learning English grammar. Teachers pointed out that if teachers allowed students to use their mother language in the classroom, they would usually get into the habit of translating from Vietnamese to English or vice versa. Consequently, students would face several difficulties resulting from the differences between the two languages such as the tense forms and the passive voice. For example, in English, the passive voice expresses a passive meaning, but there is no passive form of the verbs in Vietnamese although words like “bị” or “được” are used to denote the notion of passive. As a result, students often base their translation of the passive meaning from Vietnamese to English on this and end up using the wrong form of the verb due to their habit.

Another noticeable point is the impact of using prepositions in Vietnamese on using those in English. If students rely on Vietnamese sentences and then translate them into English, they will be confused when having to choose a right preposition for their intended meaning. For example, *Khi vụ án mạng xảy ra, anh ấy đang đứng ngoài/ trong/ dưới sân*. Last but not least, word order is the most common mistake for students such as ‘a criminal dangerous’ instead of ‘a dangerous criminal’, or ‘he very loves her’ instead of ‘he loves her so much’. These examples illustrate the negative influence of the Vietnamese language on English grammar learning.

Meanwhile, only 22.1% student respondents concurred with teacher’s assertion. They commented that L1 (Vietnamese) – L2 (English) differences adversely influence their understanding of the meaning of certain grammar features. In contrast, in the latter part of grammatical features’ difficulty ranking section, many of students wrote that when teachers used Vietnamese to teach and explain grammatical rules, it helped both high-performing and low-performing students avoid misunderstanding difficult and complex grammar points such as reported speech or passive voice. Moreover, if they were able to match an English grammar feature with its equivalent in Vietnamese, they could understand it thoroughly. Only one teacher respondent (7.7%) held the same view because he/she supposed that despite besides the differences between the two languages,

there were still some similarities such as parts of speech and kinds of phrases, and so on. Especially, they noted that it was helpful to use Vietnamese situations and words to explain professional terms to ease the process of learning ESP vocabulary and grammar. Therefore, these student and teacher respondents stated that using a reasonable amount of Vietnamese could facilitate students' grammar-mastery in ESP classes.

Unlike two diametrically opposed groups, two teachers (15.4%) took a general view and gave the explanation that the influence of Vietnamese in ESP courses could be either negative or positive depending on students' motivation to learn English. There are a number of students who tended to learn English grammar because they liked learning English or simply wanted to fulfill the final test, they preferred to compare and contrast Vietnamese and English to discover similarities and differences between the two languages and they thought that they might grasp and understand grammar more deeply by doing that. But for several others students, especially those who conceptualized grammar for communication only were negatively influenced because they became confused and demotivated by the complex differences between the two languages. In the setting of ESP courses, they might be positively influenced by using Vietnamese to show some differences between the uses of some grammatical patterns between the two languages.

However, a high proportion of students (36.5%) thought that they were not influenced by the Vietnamese language at all because they were aware of the differences between the two languages. This was agreed on by three teacher respondents. Those teachers said that they increase their students' awareness of this and encourage them to develop communicative skills as well as ESP vocabulary and accept 'English grammar as what it is.', then students could learn grammar without the influence of the Vietnamese language. Nevertheless, according to Ross (2000), if students are aware of the differences, interference is likely to be reduced. Therefore, although 36.5% of the student respondents are aware of the differences in use of some grammatical items between the two languages, they are still influenced by Vietnamese because the consciousness of the non-parallels of the two languages only equips them with the ability to avoid grammatical errors, but do not liberate them from mother tongue influence completely.

In short, the influence of L1-L2 differences on students' learning of certain aspects of grammar features is undeniable. Although the contrastive analysis between Vietnamese and English grammar facilitate students understand of the meaning of certain grammar features to a greater or lesser degree, more than a half of the teacher respondents believe that using Vietnamese in class adversely influences students' learning of *form*, *meaning*, and *use* of certain L2 grammar features. In addition, it seems reasonable to suppose that

grammatical awareness associated with L1 influence may somewhat impact students' perceptions of the difficulty of certain grammar features. However, to what extent and in what way it may influence students' perceptions of grammatical difficulty merit further empirical investigation.

Individual differences in language aptitude:

Several prior studies have found positive correlations between students' language analytic ability and their L2 learning (Harley & Hart, 1997a). Following these, it would be of interest to explore learners' perceptions of grammatical difficulty in relation to their language learning aptitude.

The Question 4 which investigated when students began to learn English revealed the following details:

TABLE 3. When students began learning English

	kindergarten	primary school	secondary school	high school	university level
You began to learn English at...	0%	45.2%	54.8%	0%	0%

The statistics indicate that 45.2% of student respondent got to know English at primary school while 54.8% of them began to learn English at secondary school. The findings prove that all the student respondents have learned English for 10 to even 15 years.

Although having studied English and English grammar a quite long period of time, just 9 out of the 104 students (5 in the investigators class and 4 in the economic police class) took English as one of the subjects in the entrance examinations to the People's Police University and 87 out of 104 students (83.7%) had never taken any English proficiency tests like IELTS or TOEIC. The findings from the questionnaire also showed that almost half of student respondents considered grammar lessons in ESP courses to be difficult. This might be the effect of their previous grammar leaning which refers to the grammar instruction that students received in high school and before. According to the students, at the high school level, their English teachers often taught to tests. That is, the teachers tended to spend more time and effort teaching the features that were most likely tested. In addition, to enhance students' learning of the frequently tested features and to assure they had learned the features, the teachers often provided them with a lot of tests and quizzes. Several students reported that they considered these 'over-tested' features to be more difficult to learn because they sometimes felt overwhelmed and

discouraged by the massive number of tests targeting these features. It seemed that the students who said that they did not do well on the test tend to perceive the tested features to be more difficult to learn, and the students who said that they did well on the tests tended to perceive the tested features as less difficult or even easy to learn. Therefore, it is reasonable that students whose language learning ability is higher tend to perceive grammar features to be easier to learn than those whose language learning aptitude is lower.

Moreover, the researcher also noted from the classroom observations that the high-performing students often engaged in the lessons and gave more correct answers than the low-performing ones. The high-performing students also perceived grammar features rather easy to learn while the low-performing students often made errors and needed the help and explanation in Vietnamese from the teachers.

In brief, although it seems insufficient, the findings of the study indicate that the individual learner's language aptitude also influenced on their perceptions of grammatical difficulty.

Students' low frequency of practice:

The data exploring the frequency of practicing English and English grammar of students is analyzed in the following:

TABLE 5. Students' frequency of using English after class

Part I - Question 7	Yes	No
Do you use English after class?	26%	74%

It can be seen from the table that although 74 % students want to learn English for their future jobs and 26% of the student respondents (25 out of 104) said that they love learning English; a large number of students (77 out of 104 students) admitted that they do not use English outside classroom. They seem to argue that they need to spend time for other subjects or are tired after class. Meanwhile 27 student respondents used English in the PPU's English Club activities but not frequently. Just 8 out of 27 joined online English learning forums or took the online English tests.

With a low proportion of English use after class, the researcher is not surprised that the data for students' perceptions of grammar lesson and frequency of practicing grammar features outside of class is as follows:

TABLE 6. Students’ perceptions of grammar lessons and frequency of practicing grammar features after class

Part II – Question 3	very difficult	difficult	normal	easy	very easy
How do you remark the grammar lesson?	1.9%	45.2%	49.1	3.8%	0%
Part II – Question 4	very clear	clear	undecided	not very clear	not clear
How do you understand the grammar lesson in class?	3.8%	63.5%	13.5%	19.2%	0%
Part II – Question 5	very difficult	difficult	normal	easy	very easy
How are the exercises in the textbooks?	0 0%	24 23.1%	76 73.1%	4 3.8%	0 0%
Part II – Question 6	always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
How often do you learn and practice grammar structure after class?	0 0%	0 0%	26 25%	58 55.8%	20 19.2%

The findings indicate that most students (67.3%) understand the grammar lessons instructed by teachers in class although there are still 14 students who are not sure whether they understand them or not, and 20 of the 104 student respondents admitted that they did not understand much of the grammar lessons. The reason might be tracked back to their perceptions of difficulty level of grammar lessons. There are 49 students consider learning grammar to be difficult while just 4 of the 104 students (3.8%) perceive grammar lessons to be easy to learn. A larger proportion of 49.1% student respondents have an average evaluation. Their explanation might be that the difficulty level of each grammar lesson depends on what grammar feature it taught.

Remarking on the written exercises in the textbooks, 73.1% of students considered them as neither difficult nor easy. It might depend on what types of exercises are and what grammar features they are practicing. Meanwhile, 24 student respondents supposed that the exercises are difficult. Luckily, there were 4 students thought that they could finish the exercise successfully because they are easy.

However, students did not pay much attention to reviewing and practicing grammar lessons after class in that just 26 out of 104 students (25%) answered that they do homework or practice grammar lessons at home. Up to 55.8% of student respondents

admitted that they rarely practice using grammar after class. The significant number of 20 students (19.2%) admitted that they never learn or practice grammar lessons at home.

Therefore, it is believed that ‘practice makes perfect’ but students taking ESP courses hardly do homework or practice grammar lessons after class although they are well aware of the importance of grammar. It is true that learning any language requires investment and especially spending much time on it. Unfortunately, they do not possess a habit of regular independent study outside the classroom setting.

Methodology:

Question 11 (for students) and Question 6 (for teachers) were designed to explore the techniques which were used to teach grammar in ESP courses at the PPU while Question 12 and 13 (for students) gave students the chance to state their own opinions and suggestions on approaches that they prefer for learning grammar more effectively. Those were analyzed in the following:

TABLE 7. Exploration of techniques used to present a new structure

How to present a new structure	Students	Teachers
Using grammar translation	34	2
Presenting the structure deductively	78	9
Presenting the structure inductively	93	13
Asking students to identify and underline the form in passages	79	10
Presenting the structure by short readings	30	5
Presenting the structure through situations	22	2
Others	44	6

The statistics above show that both deductive and inductive methods are supposed to be used effectively to teach grammar in ESP courses. At the same time, identifying and underlining the form in the passages are also used by most of the teachers when teaching grammar to students and that is borne out by most of student respondents’ responses. However, according to 34 students (32.7%), their teachers used translation method whereas only 2 teachers (15.4%) admitted to this.

The techniques that teacher respondents rarely use to present new structures are using situations (2 out of 13) and short readings (5 out of 13). This might be due to the limited in-class time as well as the nature of ESP classes.

Last but not least, 6 teachers chose other techniques such as pair or group discussions, relating structures students had already learned with new structures by asking – answering between teachers and students, which was confirmed by 44 students. Obviously, these techniques can create more active atmosphere to get students involved in the lessons in order to help them retain grammatical knowledge more easily.

As for the techniques employed by teachers during practice and production stages, the responses from teachers and students are shown as follows:

TABLE 8. Exploration of techniques used in the practice and production

How to practice and produce a new structure	Students	Teachers
Providing many situations for students to use the new structure	40	6
Supplying pictures for students to use the new structure	6	1
Asking students to apply the new structure to speaking or making a conversation	15	2
Asking students to apply the new structure to writing topics they choose or given	97	13
Games	0	0
Doing written exercises in textbooks in pairs or groups	104	13
Doing homework and none corrected	9	0
Doing homework and some corrected	95	13
Doing homework and all corrected	0	0
Others	0	0

The findings prove that the techniques such as asking students to do written exercises in textbooks in pairs or groups, asking students to apply the new structure in writing topics they choose or given as well as doing homework and some corrected are highly valued by teacher respondents. All of these techniques were checked by all teacher respondents, and were confirmed by most of students with 97, 104, and 95 student respondents respectively. Additionally, providing many situations for students to use new grammar earned the approval of 6 teachers. However, just a low number of student and teacher respondents thought that supplying pictures for students to use the new structure (6 students and 1 teacher) or asking students to apply the new structure when speaking or holding a conversation (15 students and 2 teachers) can help students

practice new grammar structures. Notably, neither teachers nor students believed that games are useful in practicing grammar structures in ESP classes.

Regarding the teachers' approaches to teaching grammar that students agree are useful to them, their own preferences are as follows:

TABLE 9. Techniques that students believed to be helpful in learning grammar

Methods	strongly disagree (1)	disagree (2)	undecided (3)	agree (4)	strongly agree (5)
Presenting a new structure					
Using grammar translation	19.2%	41.3%	14.4%	15.4%	9.7%
Presenting the structure deductively	3.8%	11.5%	0%	40.4%	44.3%
Presenting the structure inductively	0%	6.7%	0%	41.3%	52%
Asking students to identify and underline the form in passages	1%	16.3%	1.9%	46.2%	34.6%
Presenting the structure by short readings	1%	19.2%	3.8%	42.4%	33.6%
Presenting the structure through situations	0%	11.5%	1.9%	30.8%	55.8%
Practicing and producing stage					
Providing many situations for students to use the new structure	0%	0%	1.9%	36.5%	61.6%
Supplying pictures for students to use the new structure	0%	11.5%	6.7%	38.4%	43.4%
Asking students to apply the new structure to speaking or making a conversation	0%	2.9%	9.6%	30.8%	56.7%
Asking students to apply the new structure to writing topics they choose or given	0%	0%	11.5%	28.8%	59.7%
Games	3.8%	43.4%	0%	52.8%	0%
Doing written exercises in textbooks in pairs or groups	11%	11.5%	0%	39.4%	48.1%
Doing homework and none corrected	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Doing homework and some corrected	0%	19.2%	0%	38.4%	42.4%
Doing homework and all corrected	0%	0%	0%	11.5%	88.5%

From the students' viewpoint, they really appreciated all the techniques used to present a new structure except the grammar translation method. Just 26 students (25.1%) thought that using grammar translation method may inspire a degree of interest among students. Asking students to identify and underline the form in passages or short readings earned the disagreement of 18 and 21 respectively. Especially, one crucial point to notice is that 90 out of 104 student respondents (86.6%) were in favor of learning grammar points through given situations. It is clear that a wider range of techniques should be employed by teachers instead of only deductive and inductive methods.

Similarly, the statistics in columns 4 and 5 indicate that in practicing and producing new language, over 90% students greatly appreciated techniques such as providing many situations in which students can use the new structure, supplying pictures for students to use the new structure when writing topics they choose or are given. However, pictures are rarely employed by teachers as mentioned above.

Moreover, nearly a half of student respondents do not believe in the usefulness of games in grammar learning in ESP classes while 55 out of 104 students (52.5%) are fond of games in grammar lessons. The most likely explanation is that games help them feel relax during ESP lessons involving lots of terms and grammar features. The students tend to prefer to do the exercises in textbooks in pairs or groups rather than individual as it was selected by 91%. However, if they are asked to do homework, they expect that some or all of homework would be corrected by their teachers. This might be because their textbooks have no answer keys.

To sum up, although teaching methodology had different reactions from teacher and student respondents, teachers' grammar instruction methods seemed to influence the students' perceptions of grammatical difficulty.

4.3. Results from the classroom observation

4.3.1. Mr. Nguyen Anh Duc's class

Mr. Duc was in charge of the class Economic Police D26S in which the students are very smart and studious. Generally, he controlled the class quite well and most of the students seemed to understand the lesson. Some of the students were eager to take part in the lesson but it seemed they were all high-performing students or those who had taken English as one of the examinations to get into the PPU. The grammar point (relative clause) was explained explicitly and deductively. The teacher asked the students to work in pairs and in groups to do the exercises in the textbook. The students finished the tasks quickly as they had prepared and looked up new vocabulary at home. However, the atmosphere of the class seemed a little bit boring although the teacher tried his best to

encourage the students. There were no games or interesting activities during the period. Furthermore, there were still some students making some errors such as not back-shifting the verbs further into the past in reported words or 'here and now' words in the extra exercises. It means that some students still had difficulty in memorizing the complex grammar rules. Luckily, with the help of other students and further explanation from the teacher in Vietnamese, they formed other sentences excellently.

4.3.2. Mr. Tran Le Viet Chung's class

Basically, what the researcher got from Mr. Chung's class (B1 Investigator D26S) is not different from Mr. Duc's but he explained the grammatical structure (reported speech) inductively, which means that Mr. Chung gave situations and examples in the reading comprehension and other texts before providing the rules and forms of the new structure. This made the students feel more involved in the lesson. Like Mr. Duc, he also asked his students to work in groups to do exercises. He also used Vietnamese to further explain the rules of thumb to students whenever they completed the exercise incorrectly. However, he neither used games nor interesting activities for the students.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the researchers felt that although the majority of the students in the two observed classes could understand the lesson, there were still some could not understand the grammar rules without the teachers' explanation in Vietnamese. Moreover, some of students still made errors when doing the exercises due to the complexity of the grammar rules. The study offers several implications for grammar teaching and learning in ESP courses at the PPU as follows:

1. Due to the nature of grammar lessons as boring and include a number of complex rules of thumb which are perceived to be hard to learn, they need to be supported by teaching facilities and visual aids. Moreover, multiple teaching methods should be applied by teachers in order to motivate students and get them engaged in the lessons.
2. Writing or speaking in a foreign language is not simply a process of translating from the mother tongue. Using Vietnamese in learning grammar features is believed to adversely influence the students' learning. However, in the process of teaching and learning grammar, the contrastive analysis of English and Vietnamese target features is encouraged to help students have better understanding and raise their awareness of the structural differences between the two languages. It is also necessary and useful if

students are taught and provided with equivalent meanings in Vietnamese of English grammatical structures.

3. Learning a new language in general and grammar features in particular needs time to practice, chew, and digest while students tended to spend quite little time on doing exercises and practicing the new grammar features which help them to review grammar items for memorization and usage. Moreover, students will rarely memorize grammar features if they do not pay much attention to their application to speaking and writing. Therefore, there is a need to integrate the process of learning target features with other skills especially speaking and writing. Last but not least, students should take the initiative in practice, get into the habit of doing homework, and apply grammar to oral and written communication.

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