

EFL Teachers' and Learners' Perceptions of Grammatical Difficulties

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Abstract

This paper investigates grammatical difficulty from the perspective of Saudi university students, of EFL as well as from the perspective of university teachers. It aims to find out which English grammar features are more difficult/less difficult than others. Furthermore, it attempts to determine the reasons and causes that account for such grammar difficulty. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were the two research instruments used in this study. A total number of 103 students and 85 university teachers took part in the questionnaire, while only 20 teachers and 25 students responded in the interview. All the participants were from Aljouf University (males and females). The results showed that some English grammar features were more difficult and some were less difficult than others. The obtained difficulty order determined by EFL learners and the one obtained by the teachers' perceptions were compared. Some similarities and differences were found to exist in the rank order of the features for the two groups. The findings of the study may be beneficial to syllabus designers, material developers, teachers and EFL learners.

Keywords: Perception, grammar, EFL learners

1. Introduction

Learning a second language (L2) is a lifelong process and it is often considered to be a challenging experience for L2 learners (Darus and Subramaniam, 2009). English, as the most frequently taught second and foreign language in the world, has made many researchers investigate more and more the challenges language learners face. In fact, all aspects of language, including vocabulary and grammar, play vital roles in learning a language. Thus, in order to be fluent and accurate in a particular language, grammar cannot be neglected even though vocabulary may play a more important role. According to Zhang (2009) grammar and vocabulary form the infrastructure of the English language. Zhang (2009, p. 184) stated "It is a fact that grammar should be in the foreground of second language teaching, because knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is the key to mastery of the English language". However, learning grammar is considered more difficult than learning vocabulary, and, in the EFL context, sometimes it is impossible to learn a particular point without explicit instruction. Hence, grammar is an important component for language learners to master. Mastering grammar is the foundation of proficiency in a language. Palmer (1972) claimed that the central part of a language is its grammar, and this should be of vital interest to any intelligent educated person. According to Doughty and William (1998), the selection of target grammar features for second language instruction is a matter of special importance for L2 teachers and researchers.

Dehghani et al. (2016) claimed that, in the EFL context, as learners are not in a natural environment, that the process of grammar learning is more difficult. They added that many EFL learners depend on grammar books, guided activities and exercises to increase their knowledge due to the importance of learning grammar in both receptive and productive skills. Shiu (2011) claimed that it might be helpful if teachers knew what language features are possibly more difficult for their students as this may provide useful information as to when and how they might be taught. Nevertheless, determining which L2 grammar features are more challenging for learners is not an easy task. Thus, the current study is an attempt to fill the research gap by investigating the issue of grammatical difficulty from the perspective of Saudi EFL learners, as well as from the perspective of English language teachers. It examines in depth which grammatical features Saudi EFL learners/teachers perceive as easier, and which seem more difficult. Furthermore, another important aim of this study is to determine the reasons and causes that underlie such difficulties so that they can be overcome in the future.

2. The necessity of grammar

Grammar is a key concept in learning a language. This means that grammar functions as an aid to learning instead of being an object of knowledge per se, and the importance of grammar cannot be ignored or neglected (Rutherford, 1987; Corder, 1988; Kachru, 2010; Debata, 2013). Broadly speaking, grammar is important because it is the language that makes it possible to talk about the language, yet for many language teachers and learners, the importance of grammar is associated with the accurate use of language for effective communication (Hangari and Barchi, 2012). Moreover, according to Nan (2015), knowing grammar is not enough for real communication, but an inadequate knowledge of grammar would severely constrain one's ability for effective communication. Thus, grammar is a lexicogrammatical resource for making meaning. In the process of making meaning, grammar changes in both form and meaning to ensure appropriate use in different situations. Canale and Swain (1980) argued that grammar is one of the important elements of language learning and teaching. Additionally, Ellis (2002) claimed that, while there have been significant changes in the methods of language teaching in recent years, the status of grammar instruction is an issue that language teachers still have to sort out.

Furthermore, many linguists have made incisive expositions on the importance of grammar. Bastone (1994, p. 35) declares that "language without grammar would be chaotic; countless words without the indispensable guidelines for how they can be ordered and modified". According to Chomsky (1965) grammar can be thought of as a theory of a language. Hence, for foreign language teachers, grammar is an indispensable part of language teaching. Widodo (2006) claimed that knowledge of grammar and structure enables language learners to put their ideas into words and allows them to communicate with others. Furthermore, Widodo (2006, p. 122) demonstrated that grammar plays a role in learning vocabulary: "...grammar provides a pathway to learners how some lexical items should be combined into a good sentence so that meaningful and communicative statements or expressions can be formed". Ahangari and Barghi (2012) argued that grammar knowledge is the most elaborate component of linguistic competence, and Ellis (2008) claimed that language examiners cannot (and indeed should not) ignore linguistic competence.

Moreover, Rimmer (2006) demonstrates that grammar is central to language description and the *a posteriori* construct validation of language tests consistently identifies grammar as a significant factor in distinguishing between score levels and characterising overall proficiency. In addition, Schmitt (2002) declares that "learners will be able to complete exercises satisfactorily when their attention is focused on the grammar, but when their attention shifts to a more communicative interaction, the grammar will be forgotten" (p. 29).

Nassaji and Fotos (2012) assert the significant role of grammar in language teaching, and the way of teaching grammar appropriately. In addition, Wang (2010) pointed out that grammar must be taught by arguing that grammar is the skeleton of language proficiency without which language does not make sense. Additionally, Wang, Sh. (2010) stated that it is the grammar of the language that enables us to talk about language. "Knowing about grammar also helps us to understand what makes sentences and paragraphs clear, interesting and precise. Grammar can be a part of literature discussions when we and our students closely read the sentences in poetry and stories" (pp. 313–314). In Addition, "The fact is that grammar.... still plays a big part in what many teachers, administrators, and parents consider to be basic literacy, grammar cannot be separated from the language" (p. 316). Therefore, grammar is fundamental in learning/acquiring a particular language.

It could be concluded that, it is worth mentioning that knowledge of grammar:

- Allows clear communication. Although a good command of grammatical knowledge does not imply good communication, knowledge of grammar is crucial in the communication of meaning.
- Brings reputation when communicating with others.
- Helps individuals achieve self-confidence. Inadequate knowledge of grammar affects EFL learners' self-confidence and autonomy, and as a result, it may hinder communication.
- Affects learning of other skills and sub-skills.

(Dehghani et al., 2016, p. 210)

It could be concluded that "Grammar is the heart of language, its role is important" (Saaristo, 2015, p. 305). Thus, given the importance of grammar in learning and teaching, we do need to understand what grammar is.

3. The concept of grammar

Different attempts have been made to define grammar. According to Widdowson (1990, p. 86), "... Grammar is not a constraining imposition but a liberating force: it frees us from a dependency on context and purely lexical categorization of reality". Sadighi (2008, p. 1), stated that "Grammar, as a means of communication, refers to the overall unconscious knowledge of a native speaker of a particular language". Further, Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2011, p. 71) viewed grammar "As a set of restrictions on what is allowed and disallowed in language use".

According to Debata (2013, p. 483) "Grammar is the study of words and the ways words work together; an invisible force that guides us as we put words together into sentences. Any person who communicates using a particular language, consciously or unconsciously becomes aware of the grammar of that language". Yule (2010, p. 81) defined grammar as "The process of describing the structure of phrases and sentences in such a way that we account for all the grammatical sequences in a language and rule out all the ungrammatical sequences". According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009, p. 762) grammar is "The rules by which words change their forms and are combined into sentences, or the study or use of these rules".

4. Grammatical difficulty

One of the problems of studies investigating the effectiveness of instruction in relation to the degree of grammatical difficulty is the definition of “difficulty”. The proliferation of definitions of difficulty as well as the limited scope of some of these definitions seem to be a hindrance in studying the respective effects of a type of instruction. Hence, this section will focus on a review of the literature discussing grammatical difficulty in second language acquisition.

Most recent research studies of international students identify their problems in coping with English in general, and grammar aspects in particular. First of all, Second Language acquisition literature reveals various approaches to defining “grammatical difficulty”. Krashen (1982) puts forward an intuitively appealing idea of “easy rule” and “hard rule”, but fails to make the distinction explicit. On the other hand, Green and Hecht (1992) differentiate easy rules from hard rules by the extent to which the rules can be made. While, Berent (1985); and DeKeyser and Sokalski (1996) consider 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.

Larsen-Freeman (2003a, 2003b) discussed grammatical difficulty in terms of linguistic form, semantic meaning, and pragmatics. According to Larsen-Freeman (2003a), a grammar feature can be easy with respect to one aspect, but difficult with respect to another. For instance, the form of the English passive is easy to learn, but its use is more difficult for EFL/ESL learners. Moreover, DeKeyser (2003) distinguishes objective difficulty from subjective difficulty. Objective difficulty focuses on the linguistic factors which contribute to the learning difficulty of the structures in questions. Subjective difficulty concerns the individual learners’ differences. Furthermore, Bardovi-Harlig (1987) stated that grammatical difficulty can be seen as a function of salience. Salience is equated with the frequency with which a feature arises in the input a learner receives. In other words, salience can be considered as the degree to which data is available to learners. Thus, the more frequent a feature is, the less difficult it is to acquire. In addition, a distinction has been made between functional and formal difficulty among different researchers. According to DeKeyser (1998), a functionally complex structure requires complicated mental processing operations, while formal difficulty refers to the relationship between function and form.

Furthermore, grammatical difficulty can also be related to the form, function, and meaning of a grammar feature (or a combination thereof). Hulstijn and De Graaff (1994), referring to linguistic form, defined difficulty as contingent on “the number (and/or type) of criteria to be applied in order to arrive at the correct form” (p. 103). Spada and Tomita (2010), in a meta-analysis of 41 studies found that there is no clear evidence of interaction between types of instruction and the degree of difficulty of a linguistic feature. However, they readily admitted that results might have been different had they used a different set of criteria to differ between simple and complex structures. They claimed that there are no fewer than eight different definitions of easy-difficult distinction.

The explosion of difficulty as well as the limited scope of some of these definitions seem to be problematic in studying the differential effects of types of instruction. Thus, a possible solution might be to search for a broader and more integrative perception of the concept of difficulty. Hence, the present study will investigate the language teachers’ perspective, which is usually ignored or only marginally represented in traditional second language acquisition, as well as examining the students’ perceptions of some grammatical features and the difficulties they face. Importantly, it also investigates the reasons and causes of such grammatical difficulties.

5. Previous studies

Researchers have characterised grammatical difficulty in terms of students’ correct use of grammatical features (i.e. Williams and Evans, 1998; Spada et al., 2005; Ammar and Spada, 2006). Grammar features are considered more difficult to learn if many students have difficulty using them correctly. Sawir (2005) maintains that grammar is the most difficult area in practicing English, and that knowing the structure of grammar enables language learners to improve their communicative skills. Sawir argued that “despite the great emphasis on the teaching of grammatical aspects at school, the students still find it a difficult aspect of English to learn, (p. 575). According to Shiu (2011), the learning of the third person possessive determiner (his/her) is considered difficult for Francophone students learning English as an L2 as it has been frequently observed that the students tend to have difficulty using the feature correctly. This is supported by other studies such as White, 1998; Lyster, 2004; Ammar, 2008; and Lyster and Izquierdo, 2009

Further, Ellis (2006) examined the difficulty of seventeen grammar structures as a way to investigate which are more difficult than others. The results showed that verb complement, third person –s, plural –s, indefinite articles, possessive –s, regular past tense –ed, comparative, unreal conditionals, and modals were the most difficult. In another study, Maros and Salehuddin (2007) conducted research to find out the grammatical mistakes Malaysian EFL learners commit in writing essays. They found that, in spite of studying English for six years, the participants had problems in using correct forms of English grammar in their writing. The results revealed that the main sources of errors were articles, subject-verb agreement, the use of determiners, omission of the third person singular -s, and the omission of the copula “to be”.

In another study, Scheffler (2008) also examined the difficulty of 11 grammatical features. Polish adult learners of English were asked to determine the difficulty level of 11 given grammatical aspects. The result of his study showed that tenses, prepositions, -ing forms and infinitives, modal verbs, conditional sentences, and reported speech were the most difficult grammatical aspects, while adjectives and adverbs, pronouns, nouns, articles, and passive voices were considered to be the least difficult grammatical aspects. Darus and Subramaniam (2009) also conducted a study to determine the grammatical mistakes of Malaysian EFL learners both male and female, in essay writing. The results

revealed that singular/plural forms, verb tenses, word choice, prepositions, subject/verb agreement, word order, and articles were the most difficult grammatical aspects. The results illustrated that although the participants had a weak knowledge of vocabulary in writing essays, the main problems they faced in writing their essays were basically rooted in the lack of English grammar knowledge, covering different aspects of English grammar. Another study was conducted by Spada and Tomita (2010) as an attempt to determine the difficulty of some English grammar features. They found that structures requiring two transformations or more were considered to be the most difficult, as a result of which they characterised as simple features in English: tenses, articles, plurals, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, possessive determiners, and participle adjectives.

Shiu (2011) examined EFL learners' perception of grammatical difficulty and investigated 20 selected features of grammar through a questionnaire. Shiu found that some features were more difficult than others for the participants to learn. He concluded that some of the 20 features, including embedded question clauses, prepositions, real conditional, participle constructions, and unreal conditionals were considered by the participants as the most difficult. On the other hand, it was found that negation, third person -s, present progressive, simple past -ed, wh- questions, and modal auxiliaries, were the least difficult features for the participants. In another study, Scheffler (2011) explored the grammatical difficulty from English language teachers' perspectives. 20 Polish teachers of English were asked to rank twelve structures on a one-to-five scale measuring grammatical difficulty. According to the teachers' responses, and based on their mean scores, the 12 grammatical features were ranked from least to most difficult as follows: adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, articles, passive voice, reported speech, conditional sentences, modal verbs, -ing forms, infinitives, prepositions, and tenses.

Graus and Coppen (2015) examined the difficulties regarding 31 grammar points. The selection criterion was based on the analysis of the grammar points covered in some best-selling English grammar course-book series in the Netherlands. Additionally, the selection of these 31 grammar points was also in accordance with the estimates of some experienced English teachers. Firstly, they asked the participants to check the difficulty of the given 31 grammar points. They found that L2 learners face a number of difficulties in some of grammatical points especially the past simple tense and the use of possessive determiners. Dehaghani et al. (2016) conducted a study investigating which English grammar features are more difficult/less difficult than others for Iranian undergraduate EFL learners. The participants in the study were 125 Iranian undergraduate senior EFL learners. The Oxford Placement Test (2007) and the researchers'-developed test of English grammar were the two instruments used. Twelve more difficult grammar features were included in the study. For each feature, five questions were asked, making the test a sixty-item grammar test. Furthermore, some experienced English language teachers were asked to rate the difficulty of the given English grammar features. The results revealed that some English grammar features were more difficult (relative clauses, determiners, tenses, conjunctions, tag questions, and prepositions), and some were less difficult (causative, reported speech, articles, conditionals, passive, and verbal) than others for the EFL learners. Moreover, the results of the difficulty order of the given English grammar features determined by the experienced teachers showed that causatives, reported speech, prepositions, relative clauses, passive structures, and conjunctions were rated as the most difficult, while determiners, verbal tenses, tag questions, articles, and conditional sentences were the least difficult grammar features. Thus, some similarities/overlaps and differences were found to exist in the rank order of the features for students and teachers.

According to Wang (2010), the practical effects in foreign language teaching in the past required paying more attention to grammar teaching. In fact, practice is considered to be the sole criterion for testing truth. In addition, in terms of the past practical effects of English language teaching, ignoring and neglecting the teaching of English grammar is not conducive to the promotion of the teaching of English as a whole, and even affects students' correct use of English. Thus, due to the lack of correct grammar, many students inside and outside the class seem not to be able to form accurate sentences. Furthermore they face a number of difficulties in learning and using grammar correctly. It is probably no coincidence that, at the same time that education and business became more globalised, and the number of students with different nationalities studying English language grew, research on the issues, difficulties and problems facing international students has also become more extensive and intensive all over the world.

It could be concluded that the above studies have been conducted to examine the hierarchical order of English grammatical features for different EFL learners around the world. These studies illustrate the importance of grammar and the difficulty of grammar for EFL learners. Additionally, these studies point out some of the factors that may affect the difficulty of grammar such as learners' level of education, experience, age, setting, gender, motivation, and aptitude.

6. Research Questions

The current study explores both university EFL students' perceptions, and English language teachers' perceptions of grammatical difficulty. The research questions motivating the current study are:

1. What is the order of difficulty of the given English grammatical features for Saudi EFL university students?
2. What is the order of difficulty of the given English grammatical features for Saudi EFL university teachers?
3. Are there any differences between the teachers' perceptions and students' perceptions on the difficulty order of the given English grammar features?
4. What are the reasons and causes that account for grammar difficulty, from both students' and teachers' perspectives?

7. Method

7.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 103 undergraduate Saudi EFL students at Aljouw University, studying in the English Department. Their ages range from 19 to 22 years old. In addition, 85 experienced English language university teachers took part in this study in order to point out their perceptions concerning the difficulty level of the English grammar features. Their experience of teaching English ranged from seven to thirteen years. Further 25 students and 20 teachers participated in the interview. The participants included males and females.

7.2 Instruments

7.2.1 Questionnaire

A questionnaire was as the main instrument in the current study. The researchers developed a questionnaire after comprehensive examinations of a variety of previous studies (Ellis, 2006; Scheffler, 2008; Darus and Subramaniam, 2009; Shiu, 2011; Graus and Coppen, 2015; Deghani et al., 2016). Then, the researchers devised a questionnaire to determine how both sets of participants (teachers and students) estimated the difficulty of a number of grammar points. The selection of the appropriate grammatical features was based on four criteria: (1) The ones that are covered in the high school teaching syllabus, (2) The analysis of grammar aspects dealt with in grammar university courses, (3) Based on the researchers' knowledge, the ones that are considered more or less problematic for Saudi EFL learners, (4) Consultation with several English language high school and university teachers.

The questionnaire used in the present study was used for both students and teachers. The questionnaire consists of two sections. The first section includes participants' biographical information. The second section comprises 31 closed-ended questions, each of which represents different grammatical features. The target features for the questionnaire were: Present perfect, past perfect, simple past, present progressive, past progressive, future tense (will, going to), negation, modal verbs, countable and uncountable nouns, passive, articles (a, an, the), unreal conditionals, real conditionals, embedded questions, third person singular -s, clauses, prepositions, adjective (comparative, and superlative), infinitive and gerunds, wh-questions, question tags, participle constructions, quantifying phrases, singular and plural, subject-verb agreement, reported speech, pronouns, adverbs, possessive -s, conjunctions, and determiners.

The participants were asked to indicate the degree of difficulty using a six-point Likert scale: 1- not at all difficult, 2- a little bit difficult, 3- difficult, 4- very difficult, 5- extremely difficult.

To help the participants (only the students) understand the questionnaire better, an Arabic-English bilingual version was provided, and the students were invited to answer the reflective questions in the language of their choice. On the other hand, the teachers' questionnaire was completely in English. The internal reliability of the questionnaire was assessed by computing Cronbach's alpha. The results showed that, overall, the questionnaire has a high degree of reliability, Cronbach's alpha was .87.

7.2.1.2 Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis of the data was performed using the SPSS program. The statistical methods employed for the analysis of data were Descriptive statistics, t-test, one way ANOVA, two way repeated measures ANOVA, Chi-Square, and Correlation. The reasons for choosing these data analysis methods stem from the research design, the purpose of which is to determine whether or not there are statistically significant relationships, at level of $p < .05$, between the independent and dependent variables in the questionnaire items and to determine the frequency of the difficulty of the grammatical features, and the means and standard deviations. The data were collected and analysed. The order of difficulty of the English grammar features provided to all the participants was also determined. Then, the results were compared with those obtained from the teachers' perceptions to investigate if there were any similarities and differences.

7.2.2 Semi-structured interview

A semi-structured interview was conducted with both students and teachers. Semi-structured interviews were used in this study as a supplement to the questionnaire. The aims of the interview were to obtain background information and to obtain information about the causes of grammatical difficulty. During the interview, firstly, we asked each participant questions about his or her prior experience with English grammar, enjoyment or not of grammar learning/teaching, and attitudes towards the usefulness of grammar lessons. Most importantly, the participants (both teachers and students) were asked about the reasons and the causes for these difficulties. The students' interviews were all conducted in the Arabic language, while the teachers' interviews were conducted in the English language. With the participants' permission, all the interviews were audio-recorded.

7.2.3.1 Procedure

The researchers interviewed 25 students (11 male, 14 female). In addition, 20 teachers (11 male, 9 female) were also interviewed. Each interview lasted between 15 and 20 minutes. Each student was informed that he could choose the language of the interview (Arabic or English) and that the interviews would be recorded. The teachers were interviewed in English.

4. Results and discussion

To examine students' and teachers' perceptions of the grammatical difficulty of the given 31 grammar features presented by the closed-ended items, the items were ranked in ascending order based on the value of their mean scores.

Therefore, in this section, the results are presented in four subsections: the first section is about the difficulties that Saudi EFL students reported facing in using the given grammatical features, and the second one is about the degree of difficulty of these grammatical features from the teachers' point-of-view. The third section is a comparison between the students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the grammatical difficulties of the selected grammatical features. The fourth section points out the reasons and the causes for these difficulties.

4.1 Students' perceptions of the order of difficulty for the given English grammar features

With regard to the first research question: *What is the order of difficulty of the given English grammatical features for Saudi EFL university students?* The quantitative data from the questionnaire and the ranking activity were analysed to address this research question as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' perceptions on the order of difficulty for the given English grammar features

Order	Grammar features	Mean	Standard deviation
1	Adverbs	1.50	1.23
2	Negation	1.57	1.26
3	Third Person Singular -s	1.60	.897
4	Simple Past-ed	1.66	1.31
5	Present Progressive	1.74	1.13
6	Future Tense (will/going to)	1.80	.999
7	Quantifying Phrases	1.89	1.40
8	Singular & Plural	2.00	1.31
9	Pronouns	2.10	1.23
10	Modal Auxiliaries	2.13	1.17
11	Adjectives (Comparative & Superlative)	2.21	1.22
12	Wh-Questions	2.33	1.50
13	Articles	2.40	1.09
14	Passive	2.46	1.23
15	Possessive -s	2.55	1.44
16	Subject-Verb Agreement	2.61	1.16
17	Past Progressive	2.68	1.20
18	(Un)countable Nouns	2.77	1.07
19	Reported Speech	2.83	1.13
20	Present Perfect	2.91	1.25
21	Question Tags	2.95	1.14
22	Infinitive & Gerund	3.00	1.06
23	Clauses	3.07	1.11
24	Past Perfect	3.10	1.31
25	Conjunction	3.15	1.09
26	Determiners	3.26	1.26
27	Prepositions	3.33	1.33
28	Embedded Question	3.40	1.90
29	Real Conditional	3.42	1.45
30	Participial Construction	3.50	1.22
31	Unreal Conditional	3.55	1.34

Table 1 outlines the descriptive statistics for the given 31 items. According to the Table above, the 31 items are ranked by their mean scores (from lowest to highest). The mean scores for these statements ranges from 1.50 to 3.55. The results suggest, from the perspective of the students, that there are difficulties in the use of the given 31 grammar features. In other words, looking at the mean scores, it is apparent that 15 out of the 31 items have a mean score below an average mean score of 2.56 (on a continuum from 1 to 5), and 2 items have a mean score of around 2.56, while the 14 remaining items have a mean score of above 2.56. The lowest mean score of the 31 items is 1.50, and the highest is 3.55. Table 1 represents the order of difficulty of the given English grammar features for Saudi university EFL learners majoring in English. By comparing the mean scores obtained, the difficulty order of the features was determined. The features that were more difficult than others were identified. Because the descriptive statistics of the questionnaire show that the mean score differences for some features are small, only the eight features with the lowest mean scores and the eight features with the highest mean scores will be discussed here.

For the given grammar features, the results revealed that unreal conditional was reported to be the most difficult feature. Participle construction was shown to be the second most difficult feature for the participants of the study, followed by real conditional, embedded questions, prepositions, determiners, conjunctions, and the past perfect. These results are consistent with those of Housen, 2002; Scheffler, 2008; Darus and Subramaniam, 2009; Shiu, 2011; Dehghani et al. 2016. An examination of these most difficult features illustrates that they can be differentiated from each other by the

extent of the metalanguage needed to formulate a basic rule. This means that the difficulty order may be because of the complexity of the rules. Thus, four of these features (past perfect, conjunction, determiners, and prepositions) can be formulated simply. For example, the basic for the formulation of the past perfect might be something like, “to form a past perfect verb, use *had* plus the *past participle of the verb*”. On the other hand, the four remaining features, (unreal conditional, participle construction, real conditional, and embedded questions), require considerably more use of metalanguage in the rule that explains their formulation. In other words, they have a very complex rule to formulate. For example, the basic rule for the real conditional is something like, “to formulate the real conditional, write an *if*-clause and a result clause. In the *if*-clause, use the present tense, and in the result clause, use the present/future tense or modal auxiliaries plus the base form of the verb”.

The eight features ranked as “least difficult” are adverbs, negation, third person singular *-s*, simple past *-ed*, present progressive, future tense, quantifying phrase, and singular and plural. If we again examine the features of the “least difficult” group, all these least features can be formulated comparatively simply as they have very simple rules. To illustrate, the basic rule for the formulation of the negation might be something like, “to form a negative sentence, use *be/do/have* plus *not*”.

It could be concluded that the results suggest that, broadly speaking, learners’ perceptions of grammatical difficulty are entirely associated with the amount of metalanguage needed to formulate a basic rule for the features in question; the less metalanguage needed for their formulation, the less difficult they are to learn, and the more metalanguage needed for their formulation, the more difficult they are to learn.

4.2 Teachers’ perceptions on the difficulty order for the given English grammar features

This subsection presents an answer for the second research question: *What is the order of difficulty of the given English grammatical features for Saudi EFL university teachers?* Thus, the difficulty order of the given English grammar features determined by English language teachers was examined as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Teachers’ perceptions of the order of difficulty for the given English grammar features

Order	Grammar features	Mean	Standard deviation
1	Third Person Singular -s	1.45	1.10
2	Possessive -s	1.50	.959
3	Negation	1.54	1.19
4	Adverbs	1.58	1.00
5	Present Progressive	1.60	1.09
6	Simple Past-ed	1.64	1.41
7	Future tense (will/going to)	1.87	1.18
8	Conjunctions	1.90	1.23
9	Singular & Plural	1.95	1.14
10	Pronouns	2.00	1.07
11	Modal Auxiliaries	2.10	.986
12	Adjectives (Comparative & Superlative)	2.15	.999
13	Wh-Questions	2.20	1.25
14	Articles	2.38	1.40
15	Passive	2.50	.987
16	Subject-Verb Agreement	2.57	1.30
17	Past Progressive	2.60	1.21
18	(Un)countable Nouns	2.69	1.12
19	Clauses	3.05	1.09
20	Question Tags	3.09	1.18
21	Infinitive & Gerund	3.09	1.30
22	Embedded Questions	3.11	1.23
23	Real Conditional	3.17	1.11
24	Unreal Conditional	3.20	1.37
25	Reported Speech	3.25	1.22
26	Quantifying Phrases	3.30	1.16
27	Present Perfect	3.31	1.40
28	Prepositions	3.34	1.29
29	Past Perfect	3.37	1.51
30	Participial Construction	3.40	1.34
31	Determiners	3.44	1.70

The data obtained from the questionnaire illustrated the order of difficulty of the given 31 English grammar features according to the English language teachers’ perceptions. Table 2 points out the descriptive statistics of the given 31

items. The mean scores for these statements range from 1.45 to 3.44. Here also, according to the Table above, the 31 items are ranked by their mean scores (from lowest to highest). Looking at the mean scores, it is apparent that 15 out of the 31 items have a mean score below an average mean score of 2.52 (on a continuum from 1 to 5), and 3 items have a mean score of around 2.52, while the 13 remaining items have a mean score of above 2.52. Table 2 represents the order of difficulty of the given English grammar features for English language teachers. In fact, this is in line with the students' responses in the questionnaire.

It was revealed that the order of difficulty starts from the third person singular *-s* (as the least difficult grammar feature), and ends with determiners (as the most difficult grammar feature). This is in line with Dulay and Burt (1974) who argued that teachers need to understand that although forms may seem simple, for example the third person singular *-s*, familiarising themselves with the natural order would help avoid feeling frustrated with students. Hence, the results revealed that the determiner was reported to be the most difficult feature. Participle construction was shown to be the second most difficult feature according to the teachers' perceptions, followed by past perfect, prepositions, present perfect, quantifying phrases, reported speech, and the unreal conditional. On the other hand, the eight features ranked as "least difficult" are third person singular *-s*, possessive *-s*, negation, adverbs, present progressive, simple past *-ed*, future tense, and conjunctions. These findings are in line with earlier research by Scheffler, 2011; and Dehghani et al. 2016, who compared teachers' perceptions and students' perceptions about grammar difficulty. They found a strong correlation which might infer that learners' and teachers' perceptions are considered to be strong predictors for learners' performance.

Summing up, Lightbown (2000) recognised that language teachers would naturally feel the need to plan lessons following the development sequences, yet, from her point-of-view, there are practical difficulties, such as the lack of detail on development sequences and the difficulty in determining the levels of individual students in each class. She concludes, however, that developmental sequences research can allow teachers to see progress in other ways besides accuracy alone, such as the ability to get their point across.

4.3 Students' perceptions vs. teachers' perceptions on the order of difficulty for the given English grammar features

The answer to the third research question: *Is there any differences between the teachers' perceptions and students' perceptions on the difficulty order of the given English grammar features?* is demonstrated in this subsection.

Table 3. Students' perceptions vs. teachers' perceptions on the order of difficulty for the given English grammar features

Descending order of grammatical features	Teachers' perceptions	Students' perceptions
1	Third Person Singular -s	Adverbs
2	Possessive -s	Negation
3	Negation	Third Person Singular -s
4	Adverbs	Simple Past-ed
5	Present Progressive	Present Progressive
6	Simple Past-ed	Future Tense (will/going to)
7	Future tense (will/going to)	Quantifying Phrases
8	Conjunctions	Singular & Plural
9	Singular & Plural	Pronouns
10	Pronouns	Modal Auxiliaries
11	Modal Auxiliaries	Adjectives (Comparative & Superlative)
12	Adjectives (Comparative & Superlative)	Wh-Questions
13	Wh-Questions	Articles
14	Articles	Passive
15	Passive	Possessive -s
16	Subject-Verb Agreement	Subject-Verb Agreement
17	Past Progressive	Past Progressive
18	(Un)countable Nouns	(Un)countable Nouns
19	Clauses	Reported Speech
20	Question Tags	Present Perfect
21	Infinitive & Gerund	Question Tags
22	Embedded Questions	Infinitive & Gerund
23	Real Conditional	Clauses
24	Unreal Conditional	Past Perfect
25	Reported Speech	Conjunction
26	Quantifying Phrases	Determiners
27	Present Perfect	Prepositions
28	Prepositions	Embedded Question
29	Past Perfect	Real Conditionals
30	Participial Construction	Participial Construction
31	Determiners	Unreal Conditional

The order of difficulty of the given 31 English grammar features either determined by the students or by the teachers was checked to investigate to what extent teachers' understanding of the grammar difficulty was identical to the obtained difficulty order for the EFL learners. The obtained data from the two groups were matched to find out any possible similarities and differences. The results which are given in Table 3 above illustrate the hierarchical order of the given English grammar features based on the teachers' perceptions, and the students' perceptions. Some similarities/overlaps and differences are seen. In other words, it was shown that features like determiners, participle construction, past perfect, prepositions, present perfect, reported speech, unreal conditional, real conditional, embedded questions are the most difficult features, whereas, features like the third person singular *-s*, possessive *-s*, negation, adverbs, present progressive, simple past *-ed*, future tense, singular and plural, and pronouns are the least difficult features. For the rest of the features, there were fluctuations in the rank orders of the groups.

In sum, it is obvious that English language teachers have a similar perception of grammar difficulty to the one that the learners have. This might be because the teachers' judgment might have been affected by the problems university students face in learning English grammar as they assumed, in the interview, that these problems exist for those students. Furthermore, teachers might find that some EFL learners avoid using particular grammatical features and try to use alternatives in their production. Another reason might be that teachers' judgment may be based on the order of presentation of some of the grammatical features as presented in some English grammar books.

4.4 Causes of grammar difficulty

Both teachers and students were interviewed in order to investigate what are the reasons or causes that underlie the difficulty of grammar features as a means to answer the fourth research question: *What are the reasons and causes that stand for grammar difficulty, from both students' and teachers' perspectives?*

Qualitative data were gathered from the administration of the semi-structured interview. According to the teachers' and students' responses in the interviews, different reasons for grammar difficulty were determined. In fact, as indicated by both teachers and students, the difficulty of a particular grammar feature can be a matter of learners' L1 (the mother tongue). This means the existence or non-existence of a particular grammatical feature in the mother tongue affects the mastering of that feature in an EFL context. In other words, learning an element which is absent in L1 might be more difficult for EFL learners. This finding is in agreement with Ellis, 2006. On the other hand, students tend to rely on L1 transfer when they face a difficulty in some grammar features, especially those which have a counterpart in their L1. Moreover, L2 proficiency and the developmental stage play a vital role in mastering English grammar. Thus, the highly proficient learners have good grammar knowledge, and vice versa. This indicates that low proficiency L2 students face more difficulty in learning and mastering English grammar. Such a finding is supported by Feike, 2011; Graus and Coppen, 2015. Furthermore, another reason is the one that relates to EFL settings, which means that since learners are not in a natural environment, the process of grammar learning seem to be more difficult. Hence, EFL learners might learn some particular grammatical aspects and categories in isolation. However, they might not be able to use the taught rules in real world context. This concurs with the findings of Dehghani et al, 2016.

Moreover, another reason might be attributed to the grammar features themselves. In other words, both teachers and students pointed out that the difficulty of grammar features could be affected by some factors such as metalanguage, and the complexity of rules (formal and functional complexity). This means that the complexity of the features might be affected by their difficulty level. It is clear that there are some features of grammar which, or their nature, are more demanding than others to learn. This is in line with Graus and Coppen (2015). Additionally, the grammar difficulty might come from the large number of structures in the English language as mentioned by teachers and students, which in turn makes them complex in use. In fact, and to the best of the researchers' knowledge as university teachers for more than 17 years, students find it is too difficult to use certain grammar features because of their complexity in use. This means that there are some grammar features that seem to be very complicated and thus difficult to use. This finding agrees with the work of Dehghani et al, 2016, who found that the participants' perceptions of difficulty of grammar were in accordance with whether the articulations of the rules was easy or difficult. This indicated that it was the articulation of the rules that affected the participants' perceptions of grammar difficulty.

Furthermore, the difficulty of grammar features may be intensified by the learners. To clarify this, there are several factors that affect the perception of grammatical difficulty as declared by teachers, such as learners' characteristics, meaning individual differences that include motivation, background knowledge, memory, and individuals' experiences of grammar learning. In other words, EFL learners observed that, as they do not have adequate practice of learning English grammar features, grammar attrition occurs. In fact, learners tend not to practice using English grammar more often because they feel that grammar rules are not important to learn, and they focus primarily on learning vocabulary. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, EFL learners may have a good mastery of some of grammar features in some sub-component, but not in others, which requires them to practice them more and more. Additionally, the learners' lack of motivation either to learn or to use grammatical features correctly, and the lack of individuals' experience of grammar learning is a cause of such difficulties. Since EFL learners are not aware of the importance of grammatical features, they are not motivated to learn them or to use them, and they seem not to have enough experience in mastering English grammar. As a result, grammar difficulties persist.

On the other hand, teachers themselves are considered to be another factor in grammar difficulty. Students, and also some experienced teachers, consider teacher quality a factor in determining grammar difficulty. In other words, since the quality of teaching is unsatisfactory, participants linked it, in almost all cases, to knowledge of grammatical features. Students indicated that for a teacher to be able to explain a grammar structure correctly, s/he needs to have a full

understanding of it, which according to them is far from obvious. They argued that as teachers become more qualified, their insecurity regarding grammatical knowledge declines and finally disappears entirely. Students added that some of their teachers' lack of oral competence was one of the factors that hindered conversational learning. English instruction was mostly delivered using the students' own native language. They claimed that it would be better if English were taught by native speakers. In addition, students explained their lack of grammar knowledge by commenting that, during their education, they did not have enough opportunities to use English outside the classroom, either through structured activities at school or university, or in the wider community.

Furthermore, pedagogical arrangements concerning methodology and quality of materials are seen as factors in grammar difficulty. Both teachers and students clarified that English textbooks do not focus mainly on grammar features, especially those for the early stages (intermediate, and high school). They seem to cover only the main aspects of grammar neglecting other complex and complicated ones. Thus, they relate grammar difficulty to the poor quality of textbooks. Additionally, students claimed that their teachers do not apply different methods or techniques in explaining grammar rules. They usually use simple methods, which do not seem to be helpful for all students regarding their individual differences. In fact, teachers themselves mentioned that sometimes they do not try to implement different methods in teaching English grammar either because they believe that they are already using the best methods, or, as some teachers assert, because of class time limits they do not have enough time to use a variety of techniques to teach these grammar aspects. In fact, to the best of the researchers' experiences, some language teachers tend to be pragmatic regarding the fads and trends in language teaching, successfully using old practices, never mind how old, and, at the same time, they show willingness to try new methods, usually reconstructing these for specific purposes.

Generally speaking, at any time, at any stage and in any circumstances, grammar teaching cannot be diluted. It should be an important part of foreign language teaching. Thus, teachers who teach a foreign language have to try to reform the current conditions of neglect of grammar teaching in English education, and strive to explore grammar teaching methods to fully promote the level of English of their students.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the issue of grammatical difficulty from Saudi EFL university students' perceptions, as well as from English language university teachers' perceptions. In addition, it aimed to determine the reasons and causes that make aspects of grammar difficult. The findings of the current study revealed that some English grammar features were more difficult than others from the Saudi EFL learners' and the university teachers' perspectives, while some others were less difficult to learn and to use. Furthermore, the results indicate some similarities and differences in the order of difficulty revealed by the students' and the teachers' perceptions. It was found that there were some similarities and inconsistencies between what teachers assumed as more difficult features and what Saudi EFL learners' findings revealed. Thus, teachers' judgement was not completely consistent with the results obtained from the EFL learners. The results also indicate that Saudi EFL learners' and teachers' perceptions of grammatical difficulty are influenced by different reasons or factors. These causes for grammar difficulty can be related to L1 knowledge and transfer, L2 proficiency, the complexity of grammatical aspects, to the learners, and to the teachers themselves, as well as to the poor quality of textbooks.

6. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of the current study may encourage all instructors, teachers, administrators and textbook designers to pay more attention to English grammar. According to the findings of the current study, several implications should be pointed out:

- 1- EFL learners may benefit from the findings, by spending more time and asking for more tutorial sessions to facilitate the consolidation of difficult features.
- 2- When both teachers and students are aware of this hierarchy of difficulty, they may spend more time explaining and offering examples, and may offer remedies and provide some additional comments through different activities to facilitate the mastering of difficult features.
- 3- Material developers and EFL curriculum could also benefit from the findings. They should provide sufficient guidance and help in the curriculum documents and in the teachers' books showing how these difficulties could be addressed in planning their classroom activities. They should include materials with an emphasis on the more difficult features. Additionally, providing drills and exercises which specifically address features that are more difficult might affect the consolidation of grammar.
- 4- Instructors and teachers should consider students' attitudes and perceptions when making decisions about how to teach grammar. In addition, it is essential for teachers to be aware of the level of learning difficulty of a particular grammar topic. Furthermore, it is vital for teachers to draw learners' attention to all aspects of the challenges of learning English grammar.
- 5- EFL learners need to be taught grammar through various methods and approaches to cater for their individual characteristics and individual styles of learning.
- 6- EFL teachers would do well to understand and address their learners' concerns in planning their lessons and classroom activities, and use supplementary materials, if necessary, to help learners cope with the difficulties.
- 7- Both in-service and pre-service training should be planned in such a way that student-teachers and practicing teachers articulate the potential and actual difficulties and discuss ways of dealing, or at least coping, with them.

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