



Are EFL Learners and Teachers in the Same Camp? A Study on Form-focused Instruction

Ümran Üstünbaş^{a *}

^a *Bülent Ecevit University, School of Foreign Languages, Zonguldak 67100, Turkey*

Abstract

This study reports on findings of a replication study of Valeo and Spada (2015) that investigated the timing of grammar instruction. In this respect, the frequently discussed issue of isolated and integrated form-focused instruction was reconsidered based on the beliefs of main stakeholders, teachers and learners. In order to collect data, two questionnaires consisting of 5-point Likert-scale items developed by Valeo and Spada (2015) were administered to 651 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners with different language proficiency levels and 42 instructors teaching English to them at a state university in Turkey. The analyses of the questionnaires indicated that both EFL learners and teachers were in the same camp and they preferred integrated form-focused instruction rather than the isolated one while they did not disregard the importance of the isolated form-focused instruction. The findings also revealed that language proficiency did not play a significant role in EFL learners' preferences of integrated and isolated form-focused instruction.

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Keywords: Grammar; form-focused instruction; integrated FFI; isolated FFI; teachers; learners

1. Introduction

1.1. *Types and timing of grammar instruction*

As Borg and Burns (2008) stated, “No area of second and foreign (L2) language learning has been the subject of as much empirical and practical interest as grammar teaching.” (p. 456) Over the years, while the interest in grammar studies has never declined, the focus has shifted with the introduction of communicative language teaching (CLT). With this shift which is called focus on form, the main concern regarding grammar instruction has been about how to focus on grammar in a meaningful-context rather than in a traditional form-based content. In this sense, while focus on form requires that various language points are presented in an interactive way by focusing on grammar implicitly through ‘consciousness-raising tasks’ (Ellis, 1994), traditional grammar teaching calls for explicit grammar explanations and activities.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +90-372-266-58-85, ext. 165
E-mail address: uustunbas@gmail.com
<http://dx.doi.org/>.....

An aspect of form focused instruction (FFI) that is frequently discussed is when to focus on form. Even though it has been suggested that little emphasis has been put on the timing of the grammar instruction (eg., Doughty & Williams, 1998; Spada & Lightbown, 2008; Valeo & Spada, 2015), two approaches have been proposed: *isolated* or *integrated* grammar instruction. As Lightbown and Spada (2008) proposed, these two approaches differ from their counterparts such as explicit versus implicit grammar instruction (DeKeyser, 2003) or intentional versus incidental grammar instruction (Hulstijn, 2003) in that the approaches of *isolated* and *integrated FFI* focus on meaning and communication rather than grammar instruction. In the literature, there are few studies on the effect of isolated and integrated approaches on various language knowledge and skills, one of which is the study of Elgün-Gündüz, Akcan and Bayyurt (2012) on the probable effect of isolated and integrated FFI on grammar and vocabulary knowledge. The findings of this study indicated that integrated FFI was more effective than the isolated one considering the scores and reports of the learners.

Regarding isolated form-focused instruction, it has been suggested that it could be embedded in communicative or content-based classes in that related grammar points in communicative activities are provided to students in an isolated way before the main activity. On the other hand, integrated form-focused instruction includes providing grammar instruction not before the main activity, but during the communicative activity. These integrated instructions may be comprised of grammar explanations which could be beneficial to students during the communicative activities or feedback for students' productions during the activity. Similarly, Ellis (2006) proposed that in communicative activities, instruction could be on a predetermined form or teachers could focus on an emerged form during the activity. Therefore, it might be appropriate to suggest that teachers and learners in a language classroom determine the timing of grammar instruction.

1.2. Beliefs about grammatical instruction

As the main stakeholders, teachers and learners are the ones who maintain language education in a classroom and even though the scholars and researchers provide various theories and approaches about teaching and learning, the sustainability and practicality of these theories and approaches are determined by the teachers and learners in a classroom. With respect to beliefs of teachers and learners, the evidence from the literature have indicated that they affect teaching and learning process profoundly (eg., Borg, 2003; Borg & Burns, 2008; Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Kartchava & Amar, 2014; Peacock, 2001). While these beliefs may show similarities, they differ in a number of studies. For instance, considering error correction, the findings of Schulz's (2001) study revealed that the beliefs of teachers and students did not complement each other. The distinction in the beliefs of teachers and learners can also be traced in the findings of a number of studies based on grammar teaching (e.g., Borg, 1998, 2003; Brown, 2009; Loewen, Li, Fei, Thompson, Nakatsukasas, Ahn & Chen, 2009). The study of Borg (1998) revealed that teachers'

views about grammar teaching were not in accordance with students' expectations. On the other hand, in a study carried out with language learners and teachers from two different ESL/ EFL contexts, Valeo and Spada (2015) concluded that regarding the timing of grammar instruction, teachers and learners agreed on the importance of integrated form-focused instruction and preferred it while not disregarding the value of isolated form-focused instruction. While there is much evidence about teachers' and learners' beliefs about language teaching and learning in the literature including grammar instruction, as Valeo and Spada (2015) indicated the number of studies on the timing of grammar instruction as well as isolated and integrated form-focused instruction is limited. Furthermore, another aspect of learners' beliefs about form-focused instruction which is also neglected is likely to be their language proficiency levels as the number of the studies on it is limited (eg., Ellis, 2008; Simon & Taverniers, 2011). Therefore, the aim of the current study is to provide evidence for the discussion of the beliefs of teachers and learners with different language proficiency levels in terms of the timing of grammar instruction.

1.3. Research questions

As the research questions and methodology in the study of Valeo and Spada (2015) aimed to address the same issues, they will also be used in the current study by being replicated appropriately in the following way:

1. Do EFL teachers and learners have a preference for isolated or integrated FFI?
2. Does proficiency level have an effect on EFL learners' beliefs about form-focused instruction?[†]
3. Are there differences between learners' and teachers' preferences for isolated and integrated FFI?

As Valeo and Spada (2015) stated, since the number of the studies on teachers' and learners' beliefs about the timing of grammatical instruction is insufficient, it may be beneficial to conduct further studies with different aspects or to replicate the existing studies to provide support for the ongoing discussion by presenting data from various settings. Therefore, the current study aims to address the gap mentioned above.

2. Method

2.1. Setting

The study was conducted in an EFL context at the School of Foreign Languages of a state university in Turkey. The institution provides one-year long intensive English teaching to the students in their first year at the university before studying in their own departments. It is compulsory to study English in the first year as 30 % of some courses are conducted in English whereas it is optional to study English in departments in which the language of instruction is Turkish. Therefore, each student starting to university whose departments require to have a good command in English takes a proficiency exam which consists of multiple-choice items about grammar and

[†] Added into the study by the researcher

vocabulary knowledge and those students who obtain more than 60 points in this exam carry on their education in their departments while the ones who fail must take a one-year long compulsory language education in classes appropriate for their language levels. Considering the language levels, the program starts with A1 level and ends with A2/B1 language level according to CEFR level descriptions. Learners are provided with 30 hours of integrated courses a week through daytime and evening education. An integrated course book in which all language knowledge and skills are presented in appropriate contexts is used as the main course material. In this sense, no language knowledge or skill is taught separately or no course is provided to teach these skills. As for the grammar teaching, the institution adopts an integrated grammar teaching based on the courses and the course book. Each and every grammar topic is presented in contexts and teachers assist learners to get the knowledge of these topics through meaningful-drills and activities. Grammar learning is enhanced by supporting materials prepared by the material development unit of the school. Moreover, grammar knowledge is assessed in integrated, meaningful contexts in accordance with teaching.

2.2. Participants

The participants of the study consist of 651 EFL learners who study at the aforementioned institution and 45 instructors of English and they have been selected as the participants of the study due to eligibility and convenience issues. Moreover, they participated in the study on voluntary basis by informing their consent by signing a form created by the researcher (See Appendix A). As for the demographic information, both the students and teachers had different backgrounds. To start with, the learners have various language abilities and levels, so they are placed in appropriate classrooms and learn English for an academic year. Basically, there are four language levels taught and a particular number of students from each level participated in the study: B2 ($N=32$), A2 ($N=23$) and A1+ ($N=513$) and A1 ($N=83$) (from highest to the lowest). B2 level is comprised of the students of English Language and Literature department whereas A2 and A1+ levels are comprised of the students of various departments. On the other hand, the students in the evening classes constitute A1 level. Of 880 students of the program, 651 participated in the study in total (See Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of EFL learners

Gender ($M = 1.47, SD = .500$)	Female Male	N = 342 N = 309
Age ($M = 1.06, SD = 2.91$)	17-22 23-27 28-34 More than 35	N = 621 N = 26 N = 1 N = 3
Learning experience ($M = 2.43, SD = .815$)	0-1 year 2-5 years more than 6 years	N = 130 N = 112 N = 409

Secondly, the instructors working at the institution have different educational background. They studied at different majors before being an instructor at the school or a number of them carried on their education by getting MA or Ph.D degree. On average, they have three years of teaching experience at the same school (See Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of EFL teachers

Gender ($M = 1.29, SD = .457$)	Female	N = 30
	Male	N = 12
Education ($M = 1.52, SD = .773$)	BA	N = 26
	MA	N = 11
	PhD	N = 5
Teaching experience ($M = 2.10, SD = .821$)	0-5 year	N = 12
	6-10 years	N = 14
	more than 10 years	N = 16

2.3. Materials

2.3.1. Questionnaires

Since the study design is based on replication, the questionnaires administered in the study of Valeo and Spada (2015) were used in order to collect data. To this end, the questionnaires included 5-point Likert scale items about *isolated* or *integrated* approaches proposed by Spada and Lightbown (2008). While learners' questionnaire consisted of 24 items on *integrated FFI* (12 items) and *isolated FFI* (12 items) and was administered to the learners in their mother tongue, instructors' questionnaire consisted of 20 items (*integrated FFI*= 10; *isolated FFI* =10), which was adapted from the one used in the study of Burgess and Etherington (2002, as cited in Valeo & Spada, 2015). With regard to students' questionnaire, an example item on isolated FFI was as follows: *I prefer lessons that teach grammar separately from communication*; while the item on integrated FFI was that *I prefer teaching grammar as part of meaning-based activities* (Valeo & Spada, 2015, p. 8). These questionnaires were administered to the participants of the current study after obtaining required permission from Valeo and Spada (2015) by the researcher.

2.3.2. Data collection procedures

In light of the procedures followed in the study of Valeo and Spada (2015), first, the questionnaires were examined in order to examine their appropriateness to the context of the present study. As a result of this examination, it was found that the items were all applicable except for the fact that the questionnaires also included items on ESL learners and teachers. Following the adaptation procedures and evaluating the results of reliability and factor analyses of the questionnaires reported by Valeo and Spada (2015), the questionnaires were designed for the current study. Due to the fact that learners' questionnaire needed to be in the native language, it was translated into Turkish. To check the suitability of the translation, two experts who have knowledge of both the target language and the language of the questionnaire translated the questionnaire backward and the comparison of the

translations indicated internal consistency. Therefore, the questionnaires were administered to the participants and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 21) was used for the statistical analyses of the questionnaires.

3. Results

In order to address the first research question in which EFL learners and teachers preferences of isolated or integrated FFI were examined, both parametric and nonparametric T-tests were conducted considering the distributions of the variables. Since the data belonging to the teachers had a normal distribution with skewness of .278 ($SE=.365$) and kurtosis of $-.086$, ($SE=.817$) for isolated FFI and with skewness of $-.207$, ($SE=.365$) and kurtosis of $-.817$ ($SE=.717$) for the integrated one, a paired sample T-test was conducted to compare their preferences and the output indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in the preferences for isolated FFI ($M=2.56$ $SD=.54$) and integrated FFI ($M=3.7$, $SD=.44$) conditions; $t(41) = 8.42$, $p < .05$, $d=2.3$ with a small effect size (See Figure 1). As for the learners' preferences of isolated FFI ($M= 3.2$, $SD=.63$ with skewness of $.062$ ($SE=.191$)) and kurtosis of $.067$ ($SE=.096$)) and integrated FFI ($M= 3.7$, $SD=.59$ with skewness of $-.804$, $SE=.096$ and kurtosis of 2.109 , $SE=.191$) learners related data were not normally distributed, so a Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test was conducted and the output indicated that the integrated FFI ($Mdn= 3.77$) had statistically significantly higher scores than isolated FFI ($Mdn= 3.27$, $Z=-13,797$, $p= .000$, $r=.32$) with a medium effect size rejecting the null hypothesis (See Figure 2).

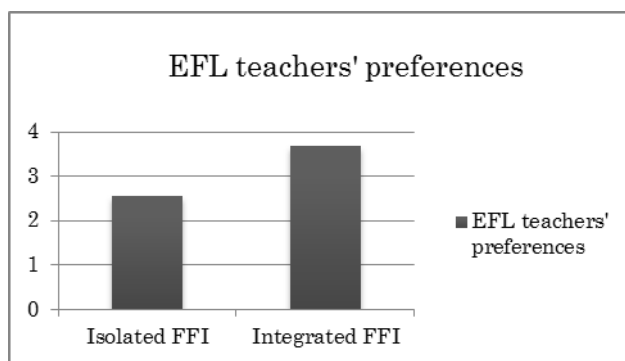


Figure 1. EFL teachers' preferences of isolated or integrated FFI

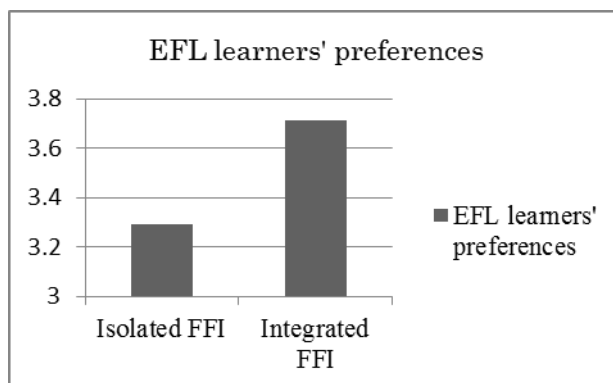


Figure 2. EFL learners' preferences of isolated or integrated FFI

With regard to the second research question about whether language proficiency level plays a role in EFL learners’ preferences of form-focused instruction, a Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted for the related variables as they did not have a normal distribution (integrated and isolated FFI are mentioned above; for language proficiency levels; $M= 2.9$, $SD=.02$ with skewness of $-1,370$, $SE=.096$ and kurtosis of 4.335 , $SD= .191$). The output revealed that there was not a significant difference between the variables indicating that language proficiency level did not have a profound effect on the EFL learners’ preferences of integrated and isolated form-focused instruction. ($X^2(3, N=651) = (24, p< .05)$ for integrated FFI and $X^2(3,N=651)= (19.6, p<.05)$ (also see Figure 3)

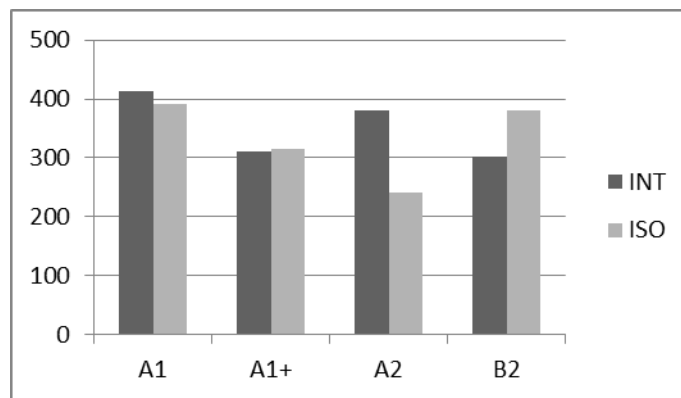


Figure 3. Preferences of the learners with different proficiency levels

In order to address the third research question in which whether there was a difference between learners’ and teachers’ preferences, a Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted as one of the variables was not normally distributed and the output suggested that the difference in the preferences of isolated or integrated FFI was not statistically significant with a small effect size ($X^2(1, N=693) = (48.8, p<.05)$ for isolated FFI and $X^2(1, N= 693) = (.15, p<.05)$ (See Figure 4).

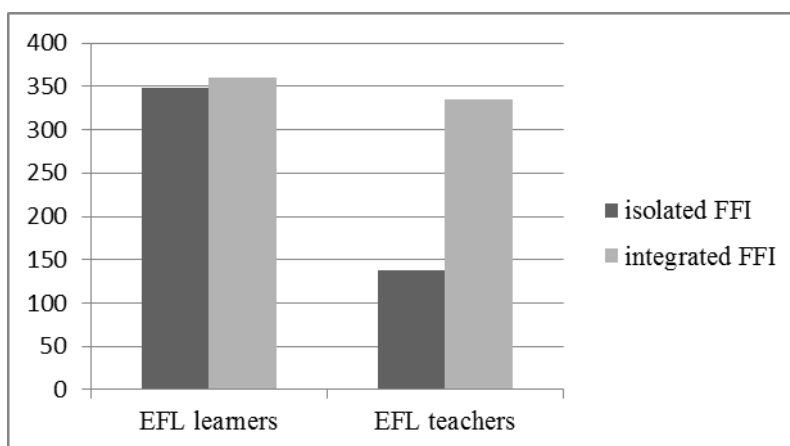


Figure 4. The comparison of EFL learners’ and teachers’ preferences

4. Discussion

In terms of the timing of grammar instruction, the current study aimed to explore the proposed approaches; isolated FFI and integrated FFI (Lightbown & Spada, 2008) from EFL learners' and teachers' points of view. As a result of the statistical analyses, it emerged that these learners and teachers favored an integrated FFI which focus on meaning through communication-based activities. However, the findings also revealed that isolated FFI was also preferred in EFL context even though it was outscored by integrated FFI. These findings may suggest that we cannot deny the significance of certain methods or approaches that might seem unfavorable by the majority of the stakeholders. On the other hand, that isolated form-focused instruction was also preferred in the study by both teachers and learners may be a result of the participants' background since most of the learners and the teachers in the study were taught grammar in a traditional way by only focusing on grammatical forms in an isolated way dependent on the language education provided at state schools in Turkey for years, which was also experienced by the researcher personally.

That integrated FFI was preferred by EFL learners and teachers has also been suggested by a small number of studies in the literature. To this end, the findings of the current study are in accordance with the findings of Valeo's & Spada's study which revealed that integrated FFI is more preferable from learners' and teachers' perspectives in both EFL and ESL context. Furthermore, the findings of the study also support the findings of Elgün-Gündüz's, Akcan's, & Bayyurt's (2012) study in which integrated FFI was considered as a more effective way of learning grammar and vocabulary than isolated one considering the scores and reports of the learners. In terms of grammar instruction, Ellis (2006) has suggested that instruction might be on a form which emerged during a communicative activity, so the fact that the participants of the study preferred to engage in communicative activities which focus on grammar instruction at the same time may support the finding of Ellis' study (2006) respectively.

Regarding the second research question about the preferences of EFL learners with different language levels for form-focused instruction, the findings of the current study suggested that there was no significant difference among language proficiency levels in terms of FFI preferences. The participants consisted of language learners from four language levels which were B2, A2, A1+ and A1. As a whole, the findings indicated that while no significant difference was revealed among these levels, A2 and B2 levels had significant differences considering integrated and isolated FFI. To this end, it emerged that A2 level learners preferred integrated FFI twice more than isolated FFI and the preferences of B2 level learners for isolated FFI was higher than integrated FFI. Therefore, it was clear that high level learners preferred a rule-governed grammar instruction. Similarly, in a study carried out with 454 Turkish low and high proficiency level learners of English on integrated and isolated FFI, Ansarin, Abad and Khojasteh (2015) stated that while the difference between these two forms were not clear among low level learners, high level learners preferred an

integrated FFI. The researchers suggested that these preferences were likely to be the result of language proficiency, which was contradicted by the present study as the findings suggested that there was no significant difference and high level learners preferred an isolated FFI. Therefore, this study may provide support for the discussion about the effect of language proficiency level on integrated and isolated FFI preferences.

As for the third research question, the probable differences between students' and teachers' views were explored regarding the timing of form-focused instruction and the conducted analyses suggested that both EFL learners and teachers were in the same camp in aspect of their views related to the question. While the findings support the study of Valeo and Spada (2015), they differ from the findings of a number of previous studies (e.g., Borg, 1998; 2003; Brown, 2009; Loewen et. al, 2009; Schulz, 2001). For instance, Schulz's (2001) study revealed that the views of language teachers and students about error correction were distinct from each other. Similarly, Borg (1998) concluded that students' expectations and teachers' views about grammar teaching conflicted with each other. Thus, the findings of the current study may prove benefits to the discussion of the timing of grammar instruction by providing data divergent from the existing research.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore EFL learners' views about the timing of grammar instruction. In light of this aim, the research questions were addressed to search for the views of teachers and learners at a state university in Turkey. The participants completed a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire developed by Valeo and Spada (2015) and included items about isolated and integrated form-focused instruction. The collected data were analyzed by conducting T-tests and ANOVA via SPSS version 21 to reveal possible similarities and differences between students' and teachers' views. The findings suggested that EFL learners and teachers preferred integrated form-focused instruction. However, they also benefited from isolated form-focused instruction. One of the reasons for this choice may stem from their past learning experiences. Therefore, the implication could be that language teachers are recommended that they implement appropriate approaches appealing to their students' needs. Not only could they base their classes on communicative activities through which necessary grammatical forms are given to the students, but also they could benefit from isolated form focused instruction when the students' needs call for this approach.

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Appendix A. Informed Consent Form

This is a replication study of Valeo and Spada (2015) conducted by Ümran Üstünbaş, the aim of which is to collect data about the views of the participants related to the timing of grammatical instruction. Participation in the study must be on a voluntary basis. No personal identification information is required in the questionnaire. Your answers will be kept strictly confidential and evaluated only by the researcher; the obtained data will be used for scientific purposes.

The questionnaire does not contain questions that may cause discomfort in the participants. However, during participation, for any reason, if you feel uncomfortable, you are free to quit at any time. In such a case, it will be sufficient to tell the person conducting the survey (i.e., data collector) that you have not completed the questionnaire.

After all the questionnaires are collected back by the data collector, your questions related to the study will be answered. I would like to thank you in advance for your participation in this study. For further information about the study, you can contact Inst. Ümran Üstünbaş; E-mail: uustunbas@beun.edu.tr

I am participating in this study totally on my own will and am aware that I can quit participating at any time I want/ I give my consent for the use of the information I provide for scientific purposes. (Please return this form to the data collector after you have filled it in and signed it).

Name Surname

Date

Signature

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Appendix B. Questionnaires

A.1. EFL learners' questionnaire - Adapted from Valeo and Spada (2015)

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Maybe	Agree	Strongly agree
1.	Grammar should be taught during communicative activities.					
2.	I like to study grammar before I use it.					
3.	I like learning grammar by communicating.					
4.	I can learn grammar during reading or speaking activities.					
5.	I like lessons that focus only on teaching grammar.					
6.	I like grammar teaching before, not during, communicative activities.					
7.	My grammar improves when I do communicative activities.					
8.	I find it hard to learn grammar by reading or listening.					
9.	I like activities that focus on grammar and communication at the same time.					
10.	My English will improve if I study grammar separately from communicative activities.					

11.	I find it helpful when the instructor teaches grammar while we read a text.					
12.	I like studying grammar rules first and then doing communicative activities.					
13.	I can learn grammar while reading or listening to a passage.					
14.	I like the teacher to correct my mistakes while I am doing communicative activities.					
15.	I like learning grammar separately from communicative activities					
16.	I like grammar teaching during communicative activities.					
17.	Doing grammar exercises is the best way to use English accurately.					
18.	I like to learn grammar as I work on different skills and activities.					
19.	Grammar should be taught separately from communicative activities.					
20.	Before reading an article, I like to study the grammar used in it.					
21.	I like communicative activities that include grammar instruction.					
22.	I find it helpful to study grammar separately from communicative activities.					
23.	I like learning grammar during speaking, writing, listening or reading activities.					
24.	I like grammar teaching after, not during, communicative activities					

A.2. Appendix B2. EFL teachers' questionnaire - Adapted from Valeo and Spada (2015)

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Maybe	Agree	Strongly agree
1.	Participating in meaning-based activities that include attention to grammar is the best way for students to develop their grammatical knowledge.					
2.	I prefer teaching grammar as part of meaning-based activities.					
3.	Teaching structures only through meaning-based activities can limit students' grammatical accuracy outside the classroom.					
4.	When students learn grammar in a meaning-based context, they will be able to successfully express their meaning.					
5.	Students learn grammar more successfully if it is presented within context.					
6.	Doing exercises that focus exclusively on individual structures is the best way for students to develop their grammatical knowledge.					
7.	I prefer lessons that teach grammar separately from communication.					
8.	Students learn grammar more successfully if it is separated from context.					
9.	Separate treatment of grammar fails to develop language knowledge which students can use outside the classroom.					

10.	I prefer teaching grammar separately from meaning-based activities.					
11.	Students' grammatical mistakes should be corrected during communicative activities.					
12.	Grammar is best taught through exercises which focus on individual structures.					
13.	Teaching grammar in a meaning-based context is my preferred way to teach.					
14.	Doing exercises that focus on individual structures is the best way to learn to use English more accurately.					
15.	I prefer lessons that teach communication and grammar at the same time.					
16.	The most effective way to teach a new structure is to present the grammar rule before a communicative activity.					
17.	Grammar should be taught separately from communicative activities.					
18.	Doing meaning-based activities that include attention to grammar is the best way to learn to use English more accurately.					
19.	The best time to correct students' grammatical mistakes is after, not during communicative activities.					
20.	Grammar is best taught through activities which focus on meaning.					

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