GRAMMAR IN THE CLASSROOM: STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY
THE CASE OF ARABIC AND MANDARIN

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to show the differences between the methodological expectations of the learners in contrast to the actual teaching methodology followed by their instructors. The study focuses more on the five aspects pertaining to the foreign language methodology. These include medium of instruction, grammar instruction, instructors as model, and usefulness of drilling, mimicry and memorization, and the use of educational tools. The sample of this study consisted of 40 learners of Arabic (20 students) and Chinese (20 students). A combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches was used in this study. The findings of this study have shown a serious discrepancy between students' expectations and their classroom reality in terms of how grammar is instructed.

Keywords: methodology, learner expectations, Arabic, Chinese.

Özet: Bu çalışmanın amacı, öğrencilerin yöntemsel beklentileri ile öğrencilere sunulan mevcut öğretim yöntemi arasındaki farklılıkları araştırmaktır. Çalışma, yabancı dil öğretimine yönelik beş konunun üzerinde yoğunlaşmıştır. Bunlar; öğretim dili, dilbilgisi öğretimi, öğretmen modeli, tekrarın, modelleme ve ezberin etkinliği; ve eğitim araçlarının kullanımıdır. Çalışmanın örneklemini toplamda 40 Arap (20 öğrenci) ve Çinli (20 öğrenci)oluşturmaktadır. Hem nitel hem de nicel yaklaşımlara dayanan bir yöntem kullanılmıştır. Çalışmanın nicel ve nitel bulguları öğrencilerin beklentileri ve gerçekler arasında ciddi bir farklılık bulunduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Yöntem, öğrenci beklentileri, Arapça, Çince.

Introduction

Most researchers support the use of mother language (L1) in foreign language learning (Zhao, 2005a) by claiming that when used appropriately, the use of L1 can be beneficial (Nazary, 2008). However, there are scholars against the thought of the use of L1 in foreign language instruction who advocate the use of foreign language itself during foreign language instruction.

The effect of using L1 is discussed in the related research literature specifically in relation to the teaching of grammar and speaking. The main problem with teaching grammar is on how much grammar should be taught and whether or not grammar instruction should follow implicit or explicit teaching methods. The question of whether or not grammar should be taught has been

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persistently debated in the fields of language pedagogy and second language acquisition (Naeni, 2008). Similarly, whether grammar should be taught implicitly or explicitly is an additional issue that is discussed in the related literature (Lü, 2002).

Instructors are an important factor in the foreign language classroom simply because students' language skills are developed by their instructors who are the first in modeling grammar and speech patterns in the target language. Therefore, instructors play a major role in motivating their students to learn by providing a comfortable classroom environment (Sariçoban & Saricaoğlu, 2008). Similarly, as mentioned by Hadidi (2007), teachers have always known that the language classroom is a system and that teachers and students together create a mini-society with its own characteristics, properties, roles, restrictions and expectations that is similar to a living organism.

History of grammar teaching has shown that drilling, mimicry and memorization have been discussed as effective strategies in foreign language learning. More than three decades ago, for example, Karl (1975) claimed that language was composed of a set of speech patterns learned through a process of conditioning and drill. Today, the discussion related to how to teach grammar has grown so large that it now encompasses the use of the educational tool, such as the CD, tapes, and the Internet as they are commonly used in the teaching of grammar in foreign language classrooms. Learners can use these tools while enjoying the grammar learning process in a way that, as asserted by Can (2009) learners have the opportunity to work together and collaborate while learning the language by creating their own designs and projects using educational tools such as online learning materials. The effectiveness of these tools as perceived by the learners and their actual usage need to be verified through research studies.

The application of any teaching methodology does not imply that it definitely generates positive output. The continuing developments in linguistic theory and in language teaching theory as well as the constant changes in the language itself demand the permanent study of language and the relations between linguistic theory and language teaching or language pedagogy (Jing, 2009). Deliberate study on the perceived preferred teaching methodology and the actual usage may assist in closing the gap as to produce more effective foreign language outcome.

In the process of developing the discipline of the teaching of a foreign language, studies on grammar teaching methodology are expected to inform us about the state of grammar teaching (Lu, 2004) although we know that grammar teaching strategies used by practitioners are far more complicated than what researchers show with their findings.

The use of L1 in foreign language instruction is recognized as it speeds up foreign language learning (Zhao, 2005a). The arrangements of the instructional materials as well as the explanation of the difficult grammatical parts might be different. For instance, in teaching pronunciation, the pronunciation of the learners of different mother language backgrounds might affect the acquisition of a foreign language. Therefore the mother language of the learner has to be utilized to hasten the learning process. The instructional materials have to be relevant to learners' mother language and cultural background as well as to be taught in mother language especially at the elementary level (Liu, 2000). Thus, L1 serves as a medium in effective foreign language delivery and the needs of learners of various mother languages has to be taken into consideration prior to actual classroom teaching (Zhao, 2005a; Zhang, 2003; Liu 2000).

When the case of Arabic is considered, aspects of grammar have a major function in constructing a basic sentence. Various aspect such as gender, tenses, number and flexes are the most complicated parts in Arabic grammar. Previous studies (Mat Taib, 2006; Ismail 2005) demonstrated such important aspects as posing major barriers to students' learning or Arabic sentence structure. Therefore, appropriate initiative must be taken to stress such grammatical difficulties that students can face in the Arabic language classroom.

Students need to be taught the basic structures of Chinese sentences which are correct according to Chinese grammar for instance. Without rendering basic grammatical knowledge, it is almost impossible for learners to express themselves in that foreign language (Lü, 2002). The grammar of the native language of the learners and the grammar of the new foreign language learned can be compared and contrasted to assist the learners a better glimpse of the grammar of that foreign language.

Instructors play a very important role in the teaching process. Students modeled their instructors in various aspect of foreign language learning which include speech and listening in particular (Li, 2004). Instructors need to be equipped with theories of foreign language itself. Instructors cannot explain the phonology correctly to students if they themselves not really understand how the sounds have to be produced for instance. Students imitate almost every about the target language in the foreign language classroom. As the Chinese saying "龙生龙，凤生凤，老鼠的儿子会打洞", which means "Dragon born dragon, chicken born chicken, mouse' son can make hole!" showing the importance of modeling played by the instructors. Studies on the effects and analyses of instructors in students' modeling them place the basis of having proper instructors' training before they actually delve into the world of foreign language teaching (Song, 2003). It means not all speakers of a foreign language can be instructors automatically of that language without given sufficient training in particular ways of assisting the learners in modeling them in the acquisition of that language.

Drilling, mimicry and memorization are almost unavoidable in foreign language instruction. Mimicry provides necessary meaningful repetition of perception and production of language itself. The acquisition of foreign language is reckoned to be accomplished through memorization. The dependence on mimicry, memorization of set phrases and etc is unexceptional for foreign language learning (Baker, 2001; Harmer, 2001). Even though there are many latest teaching techniques introduced however, the use of drilling, mimicry and memorization is still rudimentary (Wang, 2003a; 2003b).

Instructors normally like to provide their students with educational tool such as scripted dialogs, language learning tapes, and etc. This modern educational technology is a very wide concept (Zheng, 2003; Zhao, 2004; Zhao, 2005b). There are several information technology as the core technology for information technology which include hardware and software technology, digitalization technology, multimedia technology, internet technology, laser and satellite transmission technology, and virtual reality technology, etc. the objectives in the use of the educational instruments are to enhance the effectiveness of the teaching of a foreign language.

Central to the teaching methodology employed by a foreign language instructor is the notion of the use that bring forth positive outcome in foreign language teaching and learning. Therefore,

this study intends to have a closer look on the discrepancy and put in effort in putting up the shutters.

Therefore, this study looks into students' expectations from grammar teaching in their foreign language classroom. Students of foreign languages in this study consisted of the learners of Arabic and Mandarin. Due to the increasing number of learners of both languages in Malaysia (Ainol & Isarji, 2009; Ismail, 2004), such studies focusing on learners perceptions are necessary in order to improve the performance of foreign language classrooms.

In short, this study is needed to verify the research question as whether there is a gap between expectation and reality relating to teaching methodology employed by focusing on five main aspects of the researchers' interests, namely, the medium of foreign language instruction, method of grammar instruction, instructor as a model, drilling, mimicry and memorization, and the educational tool used.

Methodology

Participants

The sample of this study consisted of learners of Arabic and Mandarin. Participants come from the same university, namely MARA University of Technology, Malaysia. There were 40 students taking the "Level 2 Course" in their foreign language and each group consisted of 20 students each. The rationale behind following such a sampling procedure is due to the similarity of the participants' experiences in the "Level 1 Course" that they had taken during the previous semester.

Data Collection and Analysis

The Quantitative method employed in this study consisted of a survey based on a seven-point Likert-scale. With the intention of the understanding of the discrepancies between the expected foreign language teaching methodology of the participants and the actual use of their teaching methodology, this study focuses on five main aspects as showed in the table below.

Table 1

Aspects of the study

Aspect	Number of items	Item number
Medium of foreign language instruction	1	1
Grammar instruction	2	8, 9
Instructors as model	2	2, 4
Drilling, mimicry and memorization	3	3, 5, 6
Educational tool	1	7

There are altogether 9 items in this questionnaire. All of the items related to their expectations are answered by the participants through a seven-point scale, "1" meaning most un-preferable and "7" meaning most preferable. Similarly, items related to the participants' real classroom involvement, while "1" means "not used in the foreign language classroom," the option "7" means that the item is used very frequently in their foreign language classroom. The findings of this study were analyzed using SPSS 11.5 for Windows.

A qualitative study component was also employed to enrich and support the quantitative findings. Five students of Arabic (2 boys and 3 girls) and five other from the Mandarin (1 boy and 4 girls) course were chosen randomly and were interviewed to learn more about the five aspects mentioned above. Two sessions of meetings were held for group interviews which lasted for one hour for each for Arabic learners and Mandarin learners separately. The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed and compared to find the common points and were then added into the analysis of the findings.

Findings and Discussion
Quantitative findings

The findings in comparison are shown in the table below. The findings show that there isn't any significant difference between Arabic learners and Mandarin learners on the five aspects related to their expectations and what happens in the real classroom environment. It is also shown L1 or L2 does not stand as a variable affecting how students perceive the foreign language teaching methodology followed in their classrooms.

Table 2

Comparison of both Arabic and Mandarin students' responses to their expectations and reality

Aspect	Arabic (Mean)	Mandarin (Mean)	T-test	Significance (2 tailed)
Expectation				
1. Medium of foreign language instruction	5.9000	5.8000	1.557	.128
2. Grammar instruction	6.4750	6.1750	1.653	.107
3. Instructors as model	5.5500	5.5000	.170	.866
4. Drilling, mimicry and memorization	6.2000	6.4834	1.032	.309
5. Educational tool	5.4000	5.5500	.336	.739
Actual situation				
1. Medium of foreign language instruction	5.6000	5.9500	.551	.585
2. Grammar instruction	5.9000	5.7500	.258	.798
3. Instructors as model	4.5000	4.3750	.258	.798
4. Drilling, mimicry and memorization	6.0250	6.2250	.966	.340
5. Educational tool	4.1500	4.3000	1.350	.185

The findings of the comparison of expectation and real situation are shown in table below. By using t-test, it is shown that there are significant differences in three aspects pertaining to teaching methodology preferred and used.

Table 3

Findings of the study-comparing expectation and real situation (items)

Aspect	Expectation (mean)	Real situation (mean)	t-value	Significance (2 tailed)
1. Medium of foreign language instruction	5.8500	5.7750	.158	.329
2. Grammar instruction	6.3250	5.8250	.336	.034
3. Instructors as model	5.5250	4.4375	.332	.036
4. Drilling, mimicry and memorization	6.3417	6.1250	.170	.293
5. Educational tool	5.4750	4.2250	.541	.000

Findings show that students think that grammar rules should be explained and that grammar should not be taught explicitly, however drilling and repetition of the same grammatical concept lead to structure attainment (mean=6.3250). However in actual situation, they were not satisfied with the grammar instruction (mean=5.8250). Thus, students are most likely to feel that they are tied to the prearranged sentence patterns without understanding these patterns properly. This limits their dynamic use of the language. In addition to that, students are not taught basic grammatical rules allowing them to expand sentences in foreign language. This again hinders their active use of the language. What deserves further attention and exploration is the foreign language instructors' understanding of how students find, compare and contrast, sense and eventually comprehend the different foreign language vocabulary, sentence pattern, grammar, contextual discourse through such activities related to the teaching of listening, speaking, reading comprehension, writing and translation in a culturally meaningful and appropriate way (Larry, Richard, & Lisa, 2000). Therefore grammar instruction is an area that shouldn't be overlooked even when the focus is on communicative foreign language instruction.

The third aspect is on instructors as model. It is shown that students perceive that their instructors should serve as models in L1 and that modeling should be performed systematically (mean=5.5250). However, their instructors were not able to model effectively (mean=4.4375). This might be related to the lack of classroom contact time in relation to the heaviness of the course content or instructor-related methodological issues. Students might not have opportunities to follow their instructors' speech while having sufficient practice with their instructors. To minimize students' tension in learning a new foreign language, instructors should help them recognize the merit inherent in the communicative approach, while being aware of the need to shift gradually from their previous learning models to more communicative methods, thus adapting step by step to the new foreign language culture (Rao, 2001). In bridging the gap between L1 and L2, it is obligatory to have instructors play vital model especially when there is rare opportunity for the learners to get in touch with L1 speakers in their near environment.

The fifth aspect is the educational tool and it is shown that students perceive that language learning tapes and CDs should be utilized (mean=5.4750). However in actual situation, they were not be able to get these educational tools to support their learning (mean=4.2250). It is shown that there is a need in the use of educational tools to speed up L1 learning. As research and practice of L1 move forward by developing new ways for using educational technologies the challenges are becoming clearer (Goh, 2008; 2009).

The findings also show that students agree that the class should be taught in L1 (mean=5.8500). They were also favorable that in reality their foreign language classes are carried out in their L1 (mean=5.7750). Similarly, students agree that drilling, mimicry and memorization should be essential in language learning (mean=6.3417). They were also happy that in reality their instructors focused more on drilling, mimicry and memorization which assist them in mastering foreign language structures better (mean=6.1250). They were satisfied that drilling was coupled with the explanation of the grammar rule. It means that they were drilling in a meaningful manner. In such a practice, vocabulary items were taught in a dialogue and then were memorized by the students in their own time. This finding supports the view that drilling, mimicry, and memorization supports learning (Wilson, 2002).

Qualitative findings

The qualitative findings showed that most of the students agreed with the use of their L1 in their foreign language classrooms. All interviewees agreed that their teacher should use L1 while teaching the language and should also translate for them those words and phrase that are rather difficult to comprehend. However, one of the Mandarin students expressed that "there are many words or expressions that [they] would like to say in the foreign language. But [they] do not know how to say them in that specific foreign language." Therefore, it can be said that students want to have more use of L1 in the foreign language classroom. They also believed that L1 must be fully utilized to help them understand the meaning of those new vocabulary items. Still, the students interviewed concurred that their foreign language instructors used satisfactory amount of L1 to ease them in the learning of foreign languages. On the other hand, there was one Mandarin learner who suggested that the instructor "should teach us how to use some useful phrases in Mandarin, for example, how to say I want to go to toilet." Another Mandarin learner recalled her experience, "My Mandarin teacher said everything in Mandarin. It was really scary and confusingly. We really dared not open our mouth in class that time." Therefore, it seems that a balanced use of L1 and L2 can help both learners and instructors reach their goals in the classroom.

The students perceive that their foreign language instructors were important as a model in their L2 learning. In reality, they found that their L2 instructors were satisfactory as models. However, two Arabic learners added that they expected their teacher to be more creative in designing additional and attractive language activities. Although they agreed that, "[their] teacher is capable to teach the language, however, the techniques used should be improved and up to date". It implies that the teaching methodologies used did not suit their expectation. In that sense, they suggested that teachers must be equipped with the teaching competent to make student understand what the lessons were about. This brings about the issues of offering courses such as

teaching Arabic as a foreign language and teaching Chinese as a foreign language to foreign language instructors prior to their involvement in the teaching field.

Pertaining to the third aspect, most of the students perceived that they need to know the preeminent techniques to use to learn foreign languages. Most of them agreed that their teacher applied drilling, mimicry and memorization in the class. However, they agreed that in reality, their expectation has not been met to some extent. The reasons given by students of the disability to apply this teaching methodology in the classrooms were "insufficient classroom time," "too many students in a class", "too many chapters in a semester", "instructor was in a hurry to finish the syllabus", and etc. As solution to this, one of the students suggested, "It is better for us to use all these techniques on our own before we come in our class, so that we will be able to get more benefits when our teacher enters the class and gives us extra language exercises". As such it implies that teaching methodology might encompass learning strategy instruction.

Relating to the fourth aspect, the use of materials to facilitate learning and teaching of foreign language, generally, students expected to have various learning materials for them to learn foreign languages well. In their class, the main materials used were limited to textbook and glossary. Conversely, some of the students who had an experience in learning Arabic in their school time said that, "We should be provided with more informative materials about the language. These are important to get our interests and attentions". They further added, "Teachers must emphasize why we as student must learn Arabic for instance, and relate learning of Arabic to the understanding of al-Qur'an for example". "The classroom must be informative as well. The use of projector, LCD, films, internet, newspapers, television program, computer software, comics, radio, and etc can be used as additional materials for teaching. Only then, we would be attracted." In short, students viewed that teaching materials used are the weakest part that need to be improved to meet their expectations. As one of the Mandarin learners who expressed her gratitude on the use of various materials to enrich her learning of Mandarin as a foreign language through the use of online dictionary by saying "we are able to pursuit our learning of Mandarin even after we finish studying the on-campus Mandarin courses once we know how to get viable supporting learning materials." Therefore, it is very important to teach students fishing rather than giving them fish by teaching them the way in obtaining self-learning materials.

Students generally perceive that teaching of grammar is important to them. Four of the Arabic learners expected that grammar should be explained in detail. One of the Mandarin learners said, "My instructor does give us sentence structure formula for us to follow such as STPVO. The problem is that we always do not know how to use the sentence structure formula correctly". As a whole, students were satisfied with the current teaching scenario whereby the grammatical aspects did indeed meet their expectation. Nevertheless, one of the Arabic learners proposed that the teaching of grammar should be explained by giving more examples. Mandarin learners also agreed that "overemphasizing grammar rules make our Mandarin class very boring as we were asked to do lots of grammar exercises, but in real life situation we can't speak properly in an impromptu manner". As such, it implies that grammar instruction has to be balanced by including oral practice and written drilling.

Conclusion
The quantitative and qualitative findings of this study have shown that a serious discrepancy is observed between students' expectations and reality. These are most noticeable in the aspects of

grammar instruction, instructors as model and the educational tool used. No discrepancy was found between their expectations and real life practices and the aspects of medium of foreign language instruction and the need for drilling, mimicry and memorization. Knowing that the choice of foreign language teaching methodology is generally associated with the notion of promoting autonomy in language learning (Benson, 2001), future research should shed light on how instructors can support their students in the foreign language learning in a more effective manner.

There are only five aspects pertaining to teaching methodology that were explored in this study. In the future, studies should be conducted on other aspects such as Total Physical Response, the use of authentic materials and situations, and cooperative learning, naming the few. Furthermore, this study focused only on the learning and teaching of two foreign languages. Other foreign languages, such as French, Japanese, and Turkish can be should be studied in the future. The right selection of teaching methodology is an area of study which aims to find out the relationship between the students' attitudes towards a foreign language in relation to their success (Littlewood, 2001). This opens up another research area of study in discovering the relationship between students' learning attitudes and instructors' teaching methodology.

In conclusion, this study is motivated by the belief that language teaching methodology should not be overlooked as it is essential in improving the foreign language learners' learning opportunities. The efforts in knowing the best teaching methodologies in bridging the expectation and practice in the learning of a foreign language should therefore be emphasized (Xiao, 2005). Foreign language instructors have to be equipped so as to ensure that the expectations of the learners are met in reality.

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Appendix – Self-Developed Questionnaire

Item	Expectation (1 – 7)	Real situation (1-7)
1. Class should be taught in the mother tongue with the use of the target language.		
2. Language skills are taught by teacher modeling in the target language.		
3. Drilling, mimicry and memorization of phrases should be essential to language learning.		
4. Modeling and practice of language should be introduced systematically.		
5. Drillings of words or phrases should be coupled with grammar rule explanation.		
6. Vocabulary should be taught in the vocabulary list and later memorized by the students.		
7. Language learning tapes and CD should be utilized.		
8. Grammar rules should be explained.		
9. Grammar should not be taught explicitly, however drilling and repetition of the same grammatical concept lead to structure attainment.		