



ISSN: 1817-6798 (Print)

Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities

available online at: www.jtuh.org/
JTUH
 مجلة جامعة تكريت للعلوم الانسانية
 Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities
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amtammam@uqu.edu.sa**Keywords:**deductive method
EFL
Grammar
language acquisition
learnability**ARTICLE INFO****Article history:**

Received	28 Oct 2025
Received in revised form	18 Nov 2025
Accepted	18 Nov 2025
Final Proofreading	29 Dec 2025
Available online	30 Dec 2025

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Diploma Students' Perceptions about Their English Grammar Learnability at Umm Al-Qura University

A B S T R A C T

The aim of this study is to investigate the diploma students' perceptions about their experiences learning English grammar as a general requirement course at a higher education institution- namely Umm A-Qura University (UQU) in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Ten students from different diploma programs are selected as respondents for the study, representing a population of 320 students on the Applied College Male Campus. Using qualitative methods, structured interviews are conducted whether face-to-face or on Webex. Data collection techniques include individual discussion for more profound responses. The study finds that the main strengths of using the deductive method are straightforwardness, comprehensibility, meeting instructor's expectations, building up learner's self-confidence, self-learning, enjoyableness, time-effectiveness and building grammatical skill. For the negative perceptions, participants inform that they are contributed by obstructing fluency, difficulty to achieve a dual task on rules and free practice of English at the same time, attracting attention to rules rather than use of language, and the challenges some learners face to learn the rules. These findings will hopefully enlighten the Applied College lecturers to recognize the challenges and learning techniques experienced by their students to learn grammar, and eventually develop student-oriented solutions for more effective grammar teaching for future diploma students.

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.25130/jtuh.32.12.1.2025.21>

تصورات طلاب الدبلوم حول قابلية تعلمهم لقواعد اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة أم القرى

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الخلاصة:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى معرفة تصورات طلاب الدبلوم حول تجاربهم في تعلم قواعد اللغة الإنجليزية كمقرر عام في مؤسسة للتعليم العالي - وهي جامعة أم القرى (UQU) في مكة المكرمة، المملكة العربية

السعودية. اختير عشرة طلاب من برامج دبلوم مختلفة للمشاركة في الدراسة، ويمثلون مجتمعًا من 320 طالبًا وطالبة في شطر الكلاب بالكلية التطبيقية. باستخدام المنهج الاستنتاجي، أُجريت مقابلات منظمة، سواءً وجهًا لوجه أو عبر منصة Webex. تتضمن أساليب جمع البيانات نقاشات فردية للحصول على إجابات أكثر تعمقًا. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن أهم مزايا استخدام المنهج الاستنتاجي هي الوضوح، وسهولة الفهم، وتلبية توقعات المعلم، وبناء ثقة المتعلم بنفسه، والتعلم الذاتي، والمتعة، وفعالية الوقت، وبناء المهارات النحوية. فيما يتعلق بالتصورات السلبية، أفاد المشاركون أن أبرزها إعاقة الطلاقة، وصعوبة تحقيق تركيز مزدوج على القواعد والممارسة الحرة للغة الإنجليزية في الوقت نفسه، وجذب الانتباه إلى القواعد بدلًا من استخدام اللغة، والتحديات التي يواجهها بعض المتعلمين في تعلم القواعد. نأمل أن تُشير هذه النتائج مُحاضري الكلية التطبيقية ليتعرفوا على التحديات وأساليب التعلم التي يواجهها طلابهم في تعلم القواعد، وأن يُطوروا في نهاية المطاف حلولًا موجهة للطلاب لتدريس القواعد بفعالية أكبر لطلاب الدبلوم المستقبليين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الطريقة الاستنتاجية، اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية، القواعد، اكتساب اللغة، قابلية التعلم، التصورات

1. Introduction

1.1 Theoretical Framework

Despite the debates emerging from the fact that children do not have to study grammar to learn their native language, grammar plays a significant role in learning English as a foreign language, as it analyses the language for non-native learners and facilitates their understanding of the logic behind its structures. Accordingly, it enables EFL learners to acquire, polish and use English as a foreign language. It is not only the "rules" of a language, but also how we fine-tune the meanings we wish to express. It is the sentence-making machine vital for effective communication because human interaction and communication are based on mutual understanding of recognized system of decoding language, and grammar governs the mechanisms of speaking and writing to ensure easy understanding of the specific meaning conveyed through this language by the writer or speaker to the reader or listener. Effective use of English grammar can certainly enable a learner to communicate, express his/her ideas efficiently and make sure they are not misconceived. A satisfactory level of grammar mastery can also guarantee that

listening and reading skills are instrumental. However, grammar is not only the rules of structuring a sentence; it has a lot to do with meaning, function, spoken English and written English; it is connected to syntax, semantics, morphology and pragmatics (Lightfoot, 2016).

Grammar has always been in the picture of different EFL methodology including Grammar-Translation, the Direct Method, Audiolingualism, the Natural Approach, and Communicative Approach or Communicative Language Teaching. To make a long story short, there are two main approaches to EFL grammar teaching and learning: deductive and inductive. A deductive approach is a rule-driven teaching-learning way associated with Grammar-Translation, which starts with the presentation of a rule and is followed by examples in which the rule is applied (Thornbury, 2002). In contrast, an inductive approach is the discovery learning associated with the other methods, the Natural Approach in particular, and starts with some examples from which a rule is inferred (29). A deductive approach simplifies the rule for learners before learning new language, confirms many students' expectations about classroom learning, particularly for those learners who have an analytical learning style (30). It enables teachers to deal with language points as they come up, rather than having to anticipate them and prepare for them in advance (30). However, it might be off-putting for some students, especially younger ones who may not have sufficient metalanguage...used to talk about language such as grammar terminology or may not be able to understand the concepts involved, encourages a teacher-fronted, transmission-style classroom...at the expense of student involvement and interaction, and encourages the belief that learning a language is simply a case of knowing the rules (30).

The textbook used at the Applied College diploma programs introduces grammar content at the beginner level, including such topics as pronouns, present simple and past simple. There are two sections to cover the grammar content of every unit at the levels of presentation, drill and practice. These two sections are Language at Work to present the rules with examples and short exercises within each unit, and Practice File at the end of the textbook with two pages of exercises on the content of every unit including grammar, vocabulary and language functions. Therefore, the textbook uses the deductive method to introduce the rules with examples and then provide exercises for verification of following them.

Because of individual differences among the diploma students as learners of English as a foreign language, the extracurricular activities each student uses, and the fact that students belong to different types of learners, it is expected that the academic performance and learnability of grammar content through the textbook differ from a student to another although they all use the deductive method as a start point. It is important to listen to the voices of the diploma students and utilize the outcome of their grammar learning experiences

1.2 Literature Review

The list of reviewed literature covers a variety of related topics, namely the definition and importance of grammar in learning EFL, the development of grammar teaching methodology, comparisons between the inductive and deductive methods, perceptions of EFL teachers on teaching grammar, and teaching grammar in other contexts. It seems that previous studies rarely tackle the perceptions of learners at school or university levels, which leads to lack in investigating the perceptions of the learners and experiences, particularly from the Saudi context.

To start with, while Harmer (2015) defines grammar as a knowledge of what words can go where and what form these words should take, Burns (2009) considers it as a nourishing resource which helps students reinforce their language learning because the unit of the analysis is the sentence and the students' roles are to be able to recognize and classify the words in a sentence into the part of speech. Furthermore, Nassaji and Fotos (2004) contend that learners pass through developmental sequences, and this suggests that it needs a teaching process to facilitate and scaffold these sequences. According to Ellis (2006), grammar teaching involves any instructional technique that draws learners' attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that helps them either to understand it meta-linguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it.

Other studies have been conducted to analyze and/or compare the inductive and deductive approaches of teaching grammar. For example, Mallia (2014) asserts that a deductive approach with explanations is successful and related to learners' expectations when the examples are drawn from a familiar local cultural context, because teachers can therefore bring grammar deductively to the notice of the

learners through rules, but the socially relevant examples promote grammar consciousness raising inductively. Do (2013) analyzes the importance of teaching grammar in EFL classrooms at Vietnamese high schools and concludes that deductive grammar is suitable for adult learners but not for young students. In addition, a study from Morocco about the perceptions of English grammar learners at the university level states that 65% of EFL teachers use the deductive method and rely on exercises to teach English grammar which causes students' boredom (Outaleb, 2015).

It has not taken long to find out that many previous studies focus on how to teach grammar and the perceptions of teachers, not on how to learn it or what increases grammar learnability. One of the studies conducted on teaching grammar is Podmenik's (2015) to investigate the topic in Slovene secondary school EFL classrooms. The findings indicate that a substantial percentage of teachers prefer to follow the communicative approaches, and that many Slovene secondary school English teachers believe that grammar teaching requires an additional integration of context and communication skills into the grammar teaching models. However, Ellis (2002) contends that for most teachers of English, the priority of teaching grammar is to assist learners to internalize the structures/rules of language, taught in such a way that they can be used for communication both written and spoken, and therefore practice is directed at the acquisition of implicit knowledge of a grammatical structure.

The review of studies shows that while there is great consciousness of the importance and methodology of grammar teaching, there is a deficiency in analyzing the perceptions of the learners and what increases grammar learnability, even in the studies conducted on the EFL baccalaureate students in other contexts.

2. Research Questions

The study pursues students' answers to the following list of four questions:

- a) As per your experience this semester, how is the English language textbook useful to you in learning grammar?
- b) As per your experience this semester, what are the challenges you face when you use the English language textbook to learn English grammar?
- c) How do you increase your learnability of English grammar this semester?

- d) What are your recommendations for new diploma students to better learn grammar?

3. Research Significance and Objectives

The significance of the study is to let the voices of the diploma students be heard in terms of how they learn grammar at the UQU Applied College and share their best individual practices for the benefit of their immediate and future colleagues. Hence, the purpose of this study is to investigate students' opinions about the way grammar is introduced in their English textbook of several diploma programs offered at the Applied College of UQU. It also aims to analyze their reflections on the benefits and drawbacks of the method used, and map how they better use the new CEFR A2 English curriculum entitled *Business Result Starter* as a start point to learn grammar in integrated, combined, comprehensive student-oriented ways with resources and activities that might not stick to the method grammar is introduced in the textbook.

4. Research Limitation

The limitation of this study **includes** the limited number of interviewed students. They are from different programs but at the same university and college-level at the diploma level. Furthermore, the nature of the research makes it qualitatively oriented. The findings might be supported in the future with more studies with a bigger number of participants from different academic disciplines in a variety of Saudi universities, but this limited study opens windows for future research on the topic.

5. Research Methodology

5.1. Study Population

This is a qualitative study that investigates the Applied College diploma students' viewpoints and experiences in learning grammar in their first semester, as qualitative data focuses on naturally occurring, ordinary events, in their natural settings (Flick 2009). Hearing sample voices representing 320 male students and collecting information from their real student life are both interesting and necessary to understand the challenges they face in learning grammar, which gives

qualitative data advantage over quantitative data (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, the study consists of the results from ten structured interviews, where the subjects are randomly sampled male students out of the male diploma students at the Applied College.

5.2. Participants

Out of a population of 320 male students, the sample of this study is ten Saudi Arabian diploma students from Umm Al-Qura University who have agreed to share their experiences in learning grammar using the English curriculum of the Applied College as a start point but add to their learnability with additional efforts that do not match the methodology of the textbook. Seven of the participants have face-to-face interviews while three have online ones on Webex.

5.3. Data Collection

The researcher conducts a series of structured interview sessions with target participants. The researcher uses a list of four questions to conduct a structured face-to-face interview with each of seven participants, while three online interviews are performed with three others on Webex. Furthermore, impulsive questions and prompts are also used for getting more thoughtful distinction in the data collected. The interview questions are formulated based on four factors, namely, both the strengths and weaknesses of the English curriculum in learning grammar, the extracurricular activities and personalized tools the students work out individually to learn grammar, and students' recommendations for newcomers to learn grammar in the same programs based on their experiences. The list of interview questions is validated by two TEFL professors at Umm Al-Qura University in Saudi Arabia. An mp3 recorder is used to record the seven face-to-face interviews while auto recording is activated during the three Webex ones. For all the interviews, the interview transcripts are kept for data analysis and record. The use of the qualitative method helps to conduct a study that is 'authentic' by delivering results that are reliable and trustworthy within a specific context (Gray, 2009; Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

5.4. Data Analysis

The analysis of data is essential in a qualitative study. Therefore, the interviews are recorded, and the responses of the participants are transcribed and double-checked with the initial transcripts for verification. Transcription is based on the interview responses and observations. The qualitative data is analyzed on an individual-by-individual basis, then the responses are combined to consider similarities and differences. Furthermore, data from each question is organized, and the responses of the participants is compiled within four main fields: positive perceptions, drawbacks, solutions and recommendations as per their experience studying grammar. To evaluate qualitative data from various outlets over the period, the constant comparative approach is adopted. The results represent diploma students' perspectives on how they learn grammar in the first semester. The research context is the diploma programs of the Applied College, Umm Al-Qura University, located in Mecca City in the western region of Saudi Arabia.

6. Discussion of Findings

The four aspects of this study as per its structured interview questions are the strengths, weaknesses, extracurricular activities, and recommendations coming from students' experiences upon learning grammar through the deductive method applied in their English language textbook. The analysis of the data collected from participants shows their positive attitudes towards their grammar learning experience using a deductive method, and the main benefits are straightforwardness, comprehensibility, meeting instructor's expectations, building up learner's self-confidence, self-learning, enjoyableness, time-effectiveness and building grammatical skill. In contrast, the findings also include a few drawbacks related to obstructing fluency, difficulty to achieve a dual task on rules and free practice of EFL at the same time, attracting attention to rules rather than use of language, and the challenges some learners faced to learn the rules. The following are the four interview questions, along with quotes from the responses of participants to each one:

7.1 As per your experience this semester, how is the English language textbook useful to you in learning grammar?

The findings indicates positive attitudes toward using the deductive method to learn grammar, as most respondents state that it has been easy, direct, interesting, skill-building and achievable to some extent. The following quotes show these points:

'I enjoy my grammar lessons very much and learn a lot.'

'It is clear, simple and easy to learn the rules.'

'The most important thing is that I enjoy the Language at Work section to make simple sentences and check others for mistakes.'

'Sometimes, it saves my time to know the rules first.'

'The quick explanation of my instructor helps me in application and practice.'

'...you don't have to ask the teacher all the time because you can check the rule.'

'I just need to follow my teacher's instructions to use the rule.'

'If I am unable to understand a point or do an exercise, I go back to the rule very easily.'

'I like it when I follow the rule and my instructor thanks me.'

'Because I have the rule very simply, I can follow it in the practice File section and learn more.'

7.2 As per your experience this semester, what are the challenges you face when you use the English language textbook to learn English grammar?

The study findings showed that there are some weaknesses in using the deductive method by introducing rules first. The list of disadvantages, challenges and difficulties includes complaints about obstructing fluency due to the difficulty to work on rules and practice at the same time, and sometimes drawing students' attention to rules rather than use of language. In other cases, respondents raise the issue of the challenges they face to learn the rules and start their language learning from that point. Others encountered a level of intimidation or frustration to use the language lest they should make mistakes. The following quotes present these points:

'It is difficult to think about the meaning and rules before I use English.'

'I need a lot of free practice to speak English without my fears of making mistakes.'

'I make sentences more slowly at the beginning because of the rules.'

'It takes me time to think if my sentence follows the rule or not before I say it.'

'Understanding the rule is easy, but using it is confusing.'

'I need to check for grammatical mistakes before I speak or write.'

'It is a big problem to follow rules to use English.'

'I can use the rule in class but not outside.'

'It is not good to make mistakes. I am not good at learning rules, and I use English to learn from my mistakes.'

'I can learn fast, but the rules stop me.'

7.3 How do you increase your learnability of English grammar this semester?

The findings indicate that while the advantages of the deductive method encourage students to learn grammar, its disadvantages entice them to find new ways for self-learning, interesting extracurricular activities that appeal to today's generation, and other resources for natural exposure to the use of English grammar in real life situations. The list of practical solutions students used to improve their English grammar learnability includes keeping a simple grammar book with lots of illustrations and simple explanation, reading in English, writing a daily journal, watching YouTube videos of English in use, listening to dialogues and simple conversations covering general topics and using the same rules they learn, using a grammar application on their smartphones, using English with each other, practicing English to communicate with their families and friends on a daily basis, learning phrases or sentences rather than separate words, and watching English movies and TV series. The following quotes demonstrate these points:

'YouTube videos are very helpful.'

'Listening to simple conversations helped me a lot and now I can use English without fear.'

'For me, it is a good way to use an application to check what I want to say, and I learn a lot from it.'

'I use English to talk with my family and friends.'

'The most important thing is to learn English as phrases and expressions or complete sentences to use in situations, not words that you need to put in sentences.'

'I use Simple Grammar in Use to learn more about grammar.'

'Keeping a journal helps me but it is full of mistakes at the beginning.'

'I read a simple English story every day.'

'We have an idea to use English only in class.'

'TV saves me because I like watching English films and series.'

7.4 What are your recommendations for new diploma students to better learn grammar?

While some participants raise issues about challenges they face with the deductive method of learning grammar this semester as presented earlier, most of them state that it is useful in many ways and provides a list of benefits as responses to the first question of this research. Furthermore, all the ten respondents agree that even the challenges turn into new opportunities for self-learning and creative ideas to use extracurricular ideas to better learn grammar and overcome the challenges they suffer from. The following quotes include some of the suggestions and recommendations the participants would like to share with newcomers to study the same English course in the future for better learning and more learnability of English grammar whether inside or outside classroom:

'You can find a lot of help on the Internet if you watch simple YouTube English Videos and clips.'

'I advise new students to watch movies and series on TV.'

'Listen to simple conversations to improve your English in general including grammar.'

'From my experience, write a short paragraph in a diary or journal about what you did every day.'

'It is not a problem if you use a simple grammar book you can understand its rules and exercises.'

'I advise you to read a simple English text like a short story every day.'

'Instructors and students should use English only in class.'

'There are grammar applications to help you learn and use grammar.'

'You should communicate with your family and friends in simple English.'

'If you learn English as phrases and expressions; this will help you make complete sentences faster.'

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of the study show that the EFL students participating in the study hold positive attitudes towards learning grammar through the deductive method applied in their English language textbook. The list of benefits includes

straightforwardness, comprehensibility, meeting instructor's expectations, building up learner's self-confidence, self-learning, enjoyableness, time-effectiveness and building grammatical skill. On the other hand, the weaknesses emerging from their challenges and individual experiences are mainly obstructing fluency, difficulty to achieve a dual task on rules and free practice of EFL at the same time, attracting attention to rules rather than use of language, and the challenges some learners face to learn the rules. It is strange that while time efficiency emerges as one of the advantages of the deductive method of learning grammar, other participants complain about having to spend more time to think about meaning and rules of grammar at the same time. Based on the individual experiences in dealing with the book, the respondents use extracurricular activities and resources that they find very instrumental and raise a number of suggestions and recommendations for new students to come to their programs and to EFL learners in general. The following table illustrates the strengths and weaknesses stated by the respondents in response to the four questions of the structured interviews, as well as one list of both the extracurricular activities they found very instrumental in learning grammar and accordingly the recommendations they want to share with EFL learners:

Table 1. Summary of Findings

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ straightforwardness ▪ comprehensibility ▪ meeting instructor's expectations ▪ building up learner's self-confidence ▪ self-learning ▪ enjoyableness ▪ time-effectiveness ▪ building grammatical skill 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ obstructing fluency ▪ difficulty to achieve a dual task on rules and free practice of EFL at the same time ▪ attracting attention to rules rather than use of language ▪ the challenges some learners face to learn the rules
Extracurricular Activities and Recommendations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ watching YouTube videos ▪ listening to simple conversations ▪ using grammar applications ▪ speaking English with family and friends ▪ learning English as phrases and expressions rather than words then sentences ▪ using simpler grammar books with illustrations ▪ keeping a journal on a daily basis ▪ reading simple linear texts such as short English stories ▪ using English only in class 	

watching English films and series on TV

Munna and Abul Kalam (2021) states that the teaching and learning process can be defined as a transformation process of knowledge from teachers to students, and teachers need to understand the need and preferences of the learners because it is essential to enhance student engagement through active learning. Therefore, education is a combined teaching and learning process, and not only teachers' perceptions should be considered but also and more importantly those of the learners themselves. Furthermore, the educational context should be student-focused and student-oriented, not teacher-centered. However, the deductive method emphasizes the role of teachers and EFL textbooks in teaching grammar to non-native speakers through content following the deductive method without taking students' viewpoints, challenges, individual differences and successful experiences into account. Considering the findings of this study, it is recommended that the extracurricular activities and the instrumental recommendations students reveal and suggest in this study should be used in teaching and learning English grammar in EFL courses inside and outside Umm Al-Qura University.

The researcher recommends that further studies on the same topic should be carried out in other Saudi universities for verification and comparison, as well as on other aspects and language skills of English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia and in other countries, with more focus on students and learning EFL rather than teachers and teaching, for more instrumental, realistic, student-friendly EFL methodologies.

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