

Explicit Grammar Teaching Pays off: the Case of Moroccan EFL University Students

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Abstract

This article investigates Moroccan university students' grammatical competence. It verifies a hypothesis stating that after at least five years of explicit instruction of grammar, students should still retain grammatical knowledge. To do so, Swan and Baker's *Grammar Scan Expert* tests were administered to 73 students almost a year after their last course of grammar. Results show that they scored quite well in some structures and that they benefited from both explicit and implicit instruction. However, they scored lower than expected in the grammar structures covered in the four grammar courses they had taken in semesters 1 through 4.

Key words: *Arab learners, explicit instruction, learning EFL grammar*

Introduction

Communicative competence, including grammatical competence, has received a great deal of attention in second language teaching and learning (Canale and Swain, 1980; Savignon, 2011). This competence requires form-function-context mappings which can be put simply as producing accurate and appropriate exchanges and/or sentences. However, before second / foreign language learners reach a good level of proficiency they move from “ignorance through inaccuracy to accuracy” (Shepherd, 2010, p. 354). Particularly, grammar is an essential component of communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1980) and its teaching and learning have been largely investigated from different perspectives, starting from zero-grammar claims (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 1993) to the consensus reported after surveying a large body of research showing that there is enough evidence to argue for the teaching of grammar (see Ellis, 2006, for many studies arguing for this). Within this framework, this study investigates whether non-native speakers perform well in grammar nearly a year after having received explicit teaching of grammar for four semesters.

Moroccan learners join English departments at university after studying English as a second foreign language for four years in the secondary school. They receive input in which grammar is an important component. At university, they have grammar as a subject for four semesters but many of them still show modest performance of accurate and appropriate choice of structures and words both in their spoken and written productions. Reforms implemented in Moroccan universities (2003, 2009, 2014) all aimed to prepare graduates for the job market or for graduate studies. Ideally, BA holders from the departments of English must attain a degree of communicative competence that will allow them to use their knowledge of English as appropriately and as accurately as possible. However, more reforms are still needed. This state of affairs brings many questions to the surface: is the teaching of grammar handled effectively? Are the students making good use of grammar input? What needs more improvements? How are the improvements to be implemented? Within the framework of these questions, this paper diagnoses students’ weaknesses so as to suggest effective ways for remediation. It attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. Which grammatical structures do EFL learners retain almost a year after explicit learning of grammar?
2. To what extent is explicit teaching of grammar useful for constructing grammatical competence?

1. Review of the literature

Communicative competence is the aim of any language teaching program including university programs such as the English Studies programs in Moroccan Universities. Extensive research has been done on the nature of communicative competence since it was first coined by Hymes (1971) as a reaction to Chomsky’s (1965) competence and performance dichotomy in addressing knowledge of language. Subsequent research has resulted in communicative frameworks that address teaching communicative competence (Savignon, 1972; Munby, 1978; Canale and Swain, 1980, 1989, 2001; Brown, 2007), and testing communicative competence (Bachman, 1990). The communicative competence, which any system of education targets, is defined in *The Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* as: “knowledge of not only if something is formally possible in a language, but also whether it is feasible, appropriate, or done in a particular speech community” (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, p.

99). It includes grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence (Canale and Swain, 1980).

Grammar has been a controversial and thorny issue of investigations. In an attempt to address the outcomes of research in this area, Ellis (2006) asks eight key questions in a state-of-the-art article on issues in the teaching of grammar such as whether to teach grammar or not, what type of grammar, when to teach grammar, the role of explicit teaching etc (see those questions pp. 83-84). Referring to mainly empirical and classroom-oriented research, he attempts to answer those questions and raises controversies each question has brought. One major conclusion confirms that zero grammar approach has not been adequately backed up and that, instead: “[T]here is ample evidence to demonstrate that teaching grammar works” (Ellis, 2006, p. 102). This conclusion has insightfully enlightened the situation which used to be such “an ill-defined domain” despite more than 20 years of research into grammar teaching methodology (Borg, 1999, p. 157).

However, the findings, confirming that the teaching of grammar has become accepted and has yielded better learning results, have not ended the controversy; rather, other thorny issues still persist. One of these issues is the role of explicit instruction in the teaching of grammar. The debate around this role has been around for more than three decades, mainly since Krashen (1981) put forward his dichotomy of ‘learning’ vs. ‘acquisition’ and claimed no interface between the two. He then discouraged the explicit teaching of grammar claiming that learners would ‘pick up’ the rules and would implicitly acquire language if they were exposed to gradual and adequate input. Among the research studies that directly questioned this theory was Schmidt’s (1990) noticing hypothesis. In this hypothesis, Schmidt brings consciousness and awareness, and in practical terms formal instruction, to the surface. Two decades later, he (Schmidt, 2010) clings to his hypothesis as follows:

“The solution I proposed [to the controversial debate on the role of awareness and attention can play in SLA whereas it has no role in L1 acquisition] (Schmidt, 1990, 2001) was to distinguish between “noticing” as a technical term limited to the conscious registration of attended specific instances of language, and “understanding,” a higher level of awareness that includes generalizations across instances. Knowledge of rules and metalinguistic awareness of all kinds belong to this higher level of awareness. My proposal is that noticing is necessary for SLA, and that understanding is facilitative but not required.” (n. p.)

After reviewing major challenges and objections to the noticing hypothesis that occurred in the literature, Schmidt admits that “none of these objections to the Noticing Hypothesis can be easily dismissed and some clearly have merit”; on the other hand, he claims that the hypothesis has not been refuted (Schmidt, 2010, n.p.). However, other issues have been raised which address learners’ individual differences together with some grammar structures being learned more easily than others. Such differences are related to motivation, language aptitude, age, previous language experiences etc. but neither the space nor the scope of this paper allows for more elaboration of these issues (see DeKeyser, 2005; Schmidt, 2010; *inter alias*). The second issue, of why some grammar structures are learned more easily than others, has been investigated in an attempt to improve the teaching of grammar. DeKeyser (2005) reviews what makes learning second language grammar difficult and relates difficulty to (1) *meaning* with regards to novelty, abstractness or both; (2) *form* as in morphological and syntactic features; and (3) *form-meaning mapping* which can be characterized by redundancy, optionality, opacity, and word

order in syntactic forms. Frequency and transparent form-meaning mapping are reported to facilitate second language learning. More concretely, Ellis (2006), following previous studies, proposes the following determinants as factors of what makes four grammar features easy, or difficult thereof, to learn: frequency, saliency, functional value, regularity, and processability. Through a rigorous methodology eliciting both implicit (based on Oral Imitation Test and Timed GJT –Grammaticality Judgement Test–) and explicit (based on Untimed GJT Ungrammatical sentences and Metalinguistic Knowledge Test) knowledge outcomes, he identifies four problematic features in implicit knowledge and evaluates them against the aforementioned determinants as illustrated in the following table:

Table 1: Grammatical complexity of four implicit features (Ellis, 2006, p. 457)

Grammatical structure	Frequency	Saliency (low/high)	Functional complexity	Regularity	Easy/difficult to process
Indefinite article	High	Low	Complex	Irregular	Difficult
Embedded questions	Medium	Low	Complex	Regular	Difficult
Unreal conditions	Low	Low	Complex	Regular	Difficult
Question tags	Low	High	Complex	Regular	Difficult

He also identifies three structures that are difficult to learn through explicit knowledge, namely unreal conditionals, ergative verbs, and dative alternation, and explains that their high conceptual complexity results in their difficulty. Both correlational and regression analyses confirm a relationship between implicit and explicit grammatical scores and proficiency scores as measured by IELTS.

Formal instruction has also been investigated in a large body of research and the major consensus calls for its consistency with SLA theories. Nunan (1998) criticizes grammar materials, including textbooks, that unfold in a linear fashion and that focus only on form rather than function or how the forms are used to communicate meaning. Instead, he suggests an organic approach which will “show them [students] how to achieve their communicative ends through the appropriate deployment of grammatical resources” (p. 103). Examples of a variety of activities are successfully designed in Azar’s UUEGi CDROM, albeit not necessarily organic (see Bouziane, 2005), in which the teaching of grammar takes place through a skill-rich context in which grammar input is provided via all the skills in a variety of activities that make the learning experience more enjoyable. The same author (Azar, 2007) goes even further to suggest a grammar-based approach whose inclination differs from that of focus on form: “Generally speaking, FonF [focus on form] seeks to integrate a grammar component into a CLT [communicative language teaching] curriculum. GBT [grammar-based teaching] seeks to integrate CLT into a structural syllabus, usually in one class (often called a grammar class) within a larger, varied curriculum.” (p. 4). Alternatively, and instead of following types of activities in the teaching of grammar such as PPP model (Present-Practice-Produce) which includes ARC model (Authentic Use-Restricted Use-Clarification) and ESA model (Engage-Study-Activate), Balstone and Ellis (2009) suggest an approach informed by the premise that “[E]ffective grammar instruction must complement the processes of L2 acquisition” (p. 195)

consisting of three principles. The first is *the given-to-new principle* which basically calls for involving the learners' knowledge about the world (given) in introducing or explaining new forms or in their own words: "how a meaning they are already familiar with is expressed by a particular grammatical form" (Balstone and Ellis, 2009, p. 195). The second is *the awareness principle*, which is "directed at making learners aware of how a particular meaning is encoded by a particular grammatical form." (p. 197), and which calls for learners' attending to form-meaning mapping through explicit understanding by exposing students to tasks that will gradually and operationally help with consciousness raising or by encouraging them to monitor their own output. The third is *the real-operating conditions principle* which calls for giving learners opportunities of experiencing the form-meaning mapping in natural-like settings; that is, in communicative situations similar to those common outside classrooms. In brief the two authors describe their approach as

"... the guidance must seek to ensure that what is new is based on what is given and that students pay conscious attention (and possibly develop metalinguistic understanding) of the target feature as a basis for using the feature in real-operating conditions." (p. 200).

Importantly, Scheffer and Cinciala (2011) provide some evidence for the explicit grammar rules being likely to contribute to second language acquisition. The participants in their study (20 upper-intermediate students), were able in most cases (81%) to explain the rules underlying the accurate sentences they produced spontaneously in an oral activity.

Despite the continuous research confirming the effectiveness of instruction in the teaching of grammar, some researchers still doubt its effectiveness. Murphy and Hastings (2006), arguing against explicit grammar teaching and parodying their previous claims (Hastings and Murphy, 2004), assert that grammar is so complicated that even textbook writers fail to put accurate rules for learners to learn it. However, while the two writers criticize textbooks and repeat the real challenges that explicit teaching is attempting to overcome, they do not refute the empirical research findings that argue for it. Particularly in writing, Truscott (1996) surveys various research studies on the effectiveness of feedback to grammar in writing and has concluded that the outcome is unsatisfactory as no way of error treatment proves to be adequately effective. As a result, Truscott (1996) discourages the correction of errors, at least the way it is carried out now, as he strongly believes it is useless and even harmful. Later, Truscott and Yi-Ping Hsu (2008) confirm that correction is effective only when errors are corrected across drafts rather than across written products; hence the lack of learning. However, Truscott's claims are revisited in a study by Van Beuningen et al. (2012) in which they show that comprehensive feedback leads to improvements not only in revised drafts but also in new pieces of writing.

Particularly in the Arab World, findings of previous research document deficiencies in grammar in students' written products. Nemassi (1991) reports that grammar errors represent the highest percentage of the errors made by the Moroccan high school students in the compositions of their last year of studies. Similarly, Bouziane (2002) finds a trade-off relationship in Moroccan high school students' narratives between error-free T-units and years of schooling. At the tertiary level, Dahbi (1984) has computed the fewest error-free T-units in the First Year university students with an average mean of 11.66 as opposed to 15.24, 15.86, and 18.06 in the Second, Third, and Fourth Years, respectively (p.66). On a broader scale, El-daly (2011) studies errors made by five Arabic and five Spanish natives in their narrative and persuasive written products and finds that in their narratives, both groups share errors in seven categories: (1)

tenses, (2) subject-verb agreement, (3) prepositions, (4) nouns, (5) pronouns, (6) missing direct object and (7) articles. Arab students' errors in tenses come to 40.9% of the total errors made in the narrative essays, followed by those of prepositions (13.6%) and subject-verb agreement errors (11.4%) whereas the Spanish natives' errors come in a different order with verb morphology representing 33.8%, followed by nouns with 14.7% and then prepositions and tenses in equal order of 11.8%. In the persuasive prose, however, the two groups share the following errors: (1) prepositions, (2) verbs, (3) articles, (4) subject-verb agreement, (5) tenses, and (6) nouns. In the Arab natives' persuasive essays, prepositions come first (28%), followed by articles and nouns (12% each) and then tense and subject-verb agreement errors representing an even 8%. The author's findings confirm that students' performance differs from a writing task to another and from one correction task to another and thus supports the variability position which "maintains that L2 learners' performance varies according to the kind of language use that they engage in and the kind of knowledge that they acquire." (p. 103).

More specifically, three grammatical items deserve more attention, namely tenses (especially the past tenses), articles, and prepositions as they remain problematic for Moroccan and Arab students. The mastery of tense has been reported to be too complicated for ESL/EFL learners. For example, McCarthy (1991) refers to it as "traditional stumbling blocks for learners" (p. 62) and Meziani (1984) as "the **bête noire** of Moroccan learners" (p. 60). In particular, the meaning and functions of the simple past, which appear to have simple explanations, are claimed to be complicated even for very advanced learners (Riddle, 1986, Bardovi-Harlig and Reynolds, 1995). Kambal (1980) reports that Sudanese university students made the greatest number of errors in tense in the descriptive, narrative, and argumentative genres with the highest frequency in the narrative (40%, the second most frequent error comes to 21.01%). Specifically in the Moroccan EFL context, Chamsi (1982) claims that most mistakes the Moroccan students make can be attributed to L1 interference. She contrasts the past tense in English and in Moroccan Arabic and points out that there are only six areas where the two languages agree. She thus concludes that "it is therefore not surprising that Moroccan learners find it difficult to grasp the past tense in English" (p. 116).

Besides interference, other researchers attribute errors of tense to two main reasons: (1) oversimplified and confusing explanations provided in textbooks and grammar books; and (2) the complexity of tense system in English. DeCarrico (1986) raises the problem of ambiguity at the semantic level as many grammarians use "tense" and "aspect" interchangeably. Meziani (1985) criticizes the superficial and simplified analyses of tenses provided by grammar books and raises the confusion such analyses may cause.

Another grammar structure, which is problematic for the Moroccan students, is the article system in English. Because this type of error is so frequent in the Moroccan students' written products it needs special analysis. Meziani (1984) found that article errors came third, after "tense" and "prepositions", with a frequency of 17.72 % of the total number of errors in the studied corpus (50 narratives by Third-Year secondary school students).

Other research studies on Arab students attribute the sources of difficulties to three main aspects: (1) Arabic interference; (2) inadequate teaching/ learning; and (3) the complexity of the English system. Kharma (1981) reports instances of interlingual interference but asserts that "... it is mostly inadequate teaching that is responsible for most of the errors" (Kharma, 1981, p. 23). Al-Johani (1982) describes in detail the use of articles in both Standard English and Modern Standard Arabic and points out that there is a striking similarity between the distributions of the uses of the articles in the two languages. However, he reports some differences as well. He

explains that generic articles are the most problematic when the two languages are contrasted as he rightly claims: "the difference between the definite generic article in English and Arabic is a major source of interference and difficulty. This is due to the fact that each language expresses the concept of genericness by a different article" (p.275). However, he claims that the data reported in research on error analysis show that learners of the two languages frequently make errors in shared features of the articles. He then explains that "this means that the learners are not sufficiently made aware of the proper uses of the articles in their own language as well as in the target language" (p. 276).

Similarly, Zreg (1983) attributes such deviant uses to the students' mother tongue interference. However, a cautious remark should be made here. Zreg chose more of contrasting uses of articles in Arabic and English than shared features between them and therefore came to percentages of wrong uses going up to 91.90% which, according to him, "were a result of interpretation of the context in their [students'] native language" (p. 246). Particularly devoted to articles, Alhaysony's (2012) study attributes the article errors made by 100 female Saudi students in their written products to interlingual causes, 57.4%, and the remaining 42.6% to intralingual errors with a high frequency of omission and addition and few instances of substitution errors.

However, another major difficulty can be attributed to the oddity of English articles as compared to other European languages. Standwell (1997) has described the articles to be "an untidy area in each language which has them, and unfortunately each language is untidy in a different way" (p. 269). Very specifically with English, the same author provides examples which contrast English with other European languages in the use of articles, and thus comes to the conclusion that English "... clearly appears to be the odd man out in article usage" (p. 275). It is therefore legitimate to attribute some of the errors of article usage to the weird article system of English.

To sum up, the sources of difficulty are mainly due to the lack of mastery of the English article system which happens to be sophisticated and odd. However, the language interference share should not be overlooked because of the contrasts between English and Arabic article systems (see the differences between the English and Arabic article systems in Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989; cited in Alhaysony, 2012, p. 58).

"Aside from the correct usage of English articles, the greatest problem facing the student of English as a second language is, no doubt, the correct usage of certain English prepositions.", reports Takahaski (1969, p. 217). The latter clarifies the logic underlying the use of four prepositions (*at*, *to*, *on*, and *in*) by resorting to other disciplines such as geometry and philosophical and mathematic logic. Khampang (1974) administers three types of diagnostic tests on prepositions of place and time to groups of students from different nationalities (Thai, Japanese, Spanish, and other) in which all the students showed difficulties with prepositions with no specific difficulties related to a certain nationality. The findings also report that there are no differences related to sex, age, number of years or number of hours per week spent in learning English. "One of the particular problems with prepositions is that they carry so little meaning that it is tempting to distinguish a great number of distinct uses for each preposition; in this way most prepositions appear to be strongly polysemous." (Bates, 1976, p. 353). Mueller (2011) starts his investigation from the premises that the prepositions are so opaque that they constrain L2 learners to master them through explicit learning. Instead, the ninety students from three different nationalities (30 Chinese, 30 Korean, and 30 Spanish) in his study used their knowledge of the meaning of the preposition to use the appropriate prepositions in the test. He thus suggests that learning semantically complex features is done through implicit learning based on big

amounts of input. Kemmerer (2005) claims that although spatial and temporal English prepositions have widely been processed in the TIME IS SPACE metaphor premises, the temporal meanings may operate independently of spatial meanings. His evidence emanates from two of brain-damaged participants in his study who scored far better on temporal matching test than on the spatial matching test. He then confirms "... that impaired knowledge of the spatial meanings of prepositions does not necessarily lead to disrupted appreciation of the analogous temporal meanings of the same prepositions." (p. 802). The thorny and complex aspects of prepositions have resulted in the call for further research in all the aforementioned studies. It is not surprising, then, that some authors devote whole books to prepositions (e.g. Bennett, 1975 and Tyler and Evans, 2003, *inter alias*). Particularly, Arab learners are reported to face enormous problems in prepositions. Kharma and Hajjaj (1997) report that Arab learners make the majority of errors in syntax, specifically in prepositions which they qualify as a persistent problem (cited in Al shehab, 2013). Al shehab (2013) finds that prepositions are the most serious problem with the highest percentage of 19.2% of the total of errors committed by Jordanian students of translation.

This review of literature has confirmed that there is enough evidence for formal instruction of grammar including in other skills as writing. This claim does not, by any means, exclude implicit knowledge. The literature review also discusses why some grammar features are easier, and others more difficult, to learn and suggests some principled ways of teaching grammar which are informed by SLA principles. Furthermore it reports previous research studies on Arab learners' challenges in relation to three grammatical items.

2. Methodology of research

2.1. The participants

The participants in this study are 73 university students from the Faculty of Letters and Humanities Ben M'sik, Hassan II University. They have studied 32 subjects among which 24 are either English language subjects or subjects delivered in English as a medium of instruction. In their academic journey, these students have attended three-hour grammar classes for 4 semesters of 14 weeks each including teaching and testing time. They are expected to speak and write good English. After graduation, they are potential candidates for teacher training colleges or for master programs in country or abroad.

Prior to university, these students studied English for at least three years in high school. During this time, the main components of their learning evolved around grammar. In addition to the grammar input upon which most of the textbooks are based, students had special focus on grammar as it represented a big proportion of their exam mark (more than a third together with many other continuous assessment tests and quizzes addressing grammar only). Moreover, teachers insist on accuracy of productive skills by (over)correcting grammar mistakes in oral performance and focusing more on grammar and syntactic mistakes in written products. On a broader level, these students had studied two other languages before taking English, Standard Arabic and French. In both languages, the input was provided from a purely explicit grammar teaching perspective.

2.2. Data collection

Students voluntarily participated in the Grammar Scan. They were given the test papers in class after receiving adequate explanations of the objectives of the diagnostic test and how useful it would be for them and for the researchers. The participants had the choice to remain

anonymous. Due to the length of the expert section of the *Grammar Scan* and other conditions such as hot weather and the timing of the test, there were special arrangements for the students to finish the test a week later because the participants showed special interest in knowing their level on such a diagnostic test. Despite the clear interest the participants had shown, they voiced their concern about the length of the diagnostic tests.

A diagnostic test has been chosen for various reasons. One of them is that it is the ‘type of test that comes closest to being central to learning’ (Alderson, 2005:4). Also, implications can be drawn for improvements of syllabus design as the designers of the *Grammar Scan* tests clearly state: “The tests are best used for syllabus planning: to check learners’ strengths and weaknesses in particular linguistic areas, so as to show what still needs to be taught.” (Swan and Baker, 2008: vii). Moreover, the items in *Grammar Scan* seem to be closer to the input provided in the context being investigated than any other type of test (see the Appendix for details). A proficiency test, for example, would require special preparation and therefore would bias the study given that the preparation time would refresh students’ minds of their grammatical knowledge.

Specifically, the choice of the expert diagnostic grammar tests is mainly informed by the types of questions that Swan and Baker (2008) use to ‘tap into’ the students’ knowledge. We adhere to the authors’ ideas regarding grammar and correctness. The need for accuracy differs from one learner to another. For example, in our students’ case, they not only need a ‘practical working knowledge of English’ (Swan and Baker, 2008), but they also need to reach a level of proficiency that is high enough to enable them to enroll in graduate programs, join the teaching force and so on. It should be noted that the chosen tests do not require any prior preparation. The test contains 30 categories with each category containing diverse questions (see Appendix for details). It also contains items covered by the university system in Morocco (see Appendix). The questions in *Grammar Scan* for experts mostly address grammar judgement as many questions require the students to decide whether structures are right or wrong, normal / unusual or formal / informal or natural, British or American, to fill in the blank, or else to justify why a structure is correct or incorrect, etc.

2.3. Data analysis

The scoring of the diagnostic tests took about four weeks. The nature of the questions required a marking scheme that would not only attribute a mark to a correct answer but also take into account the various cases where the participants selected the correct answer and pointed out the answers that were wrong. The *Grammar Scan* as designed by Swan and Baker does not give a scoring scheme. For the purposes of this study, however, it is desirable to devise percentages of correct items in order to report revealing results. The participants’ scores were calculated and computed in as percentages of the correct answers in each test.

The percentages obtained from the descriptive statistics of the SPSS program were ranked in a descending way. The ranking also shows figures related to maximum and minimum, mean and standard deviation of the students’ scores as a group. As none of the participants scored zero in any test (see minimum scores in Table 3 below) and in order to avoid any extraneous effects, the missing values of the participant who skipped a test or did not finish all the tests were considered zero on SPSS.

3. Findings

The overall findings indicate that the students generally performed quite well as the

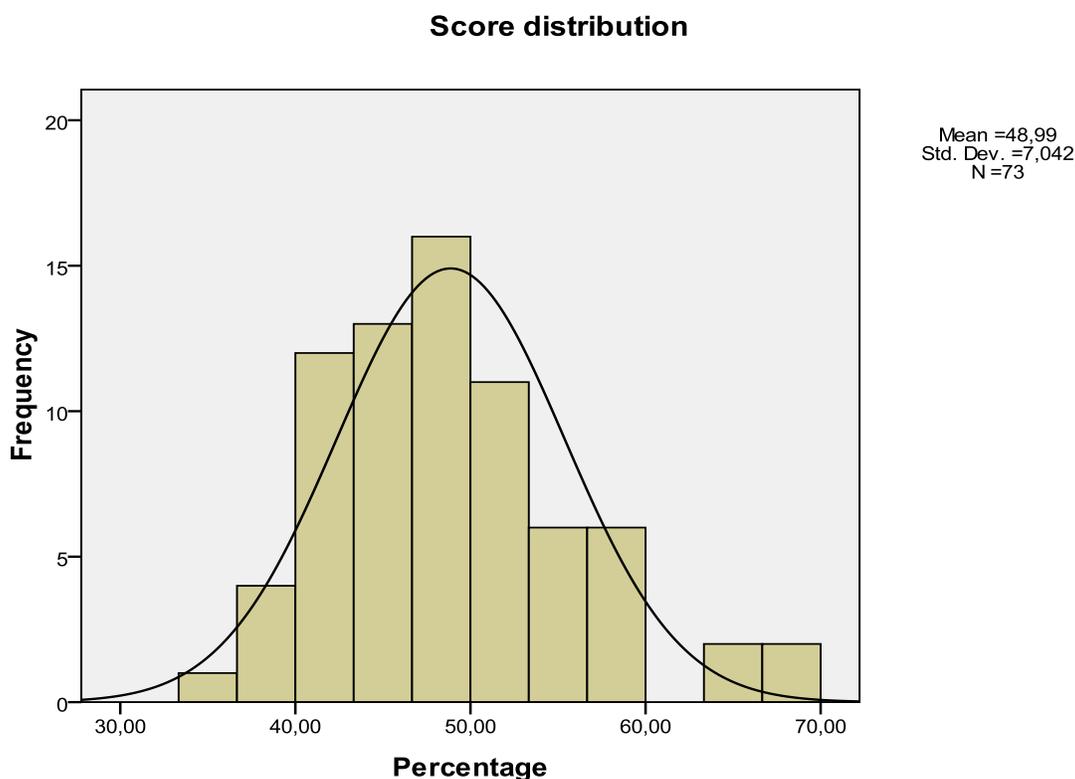
following table shows:

Table 2: Overall scores by Moroccan students on Grammar Scan

N	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximum
73	48.99	48.60	50.00	7.04	33.85	68.85

The standard deviation, together with the close values of the central tendency measures, shows that the students' scores were not scattered a lot from the mean, though the range is quite wide at 35 points. Table 2 shows that nearly 50 % of the students showed knowledge of no less than 50% of the correct answers. The student with the lowest score showed good performance in a third of correct answers as opposed to the top student who scored nearly 70%. It is worth noting here that not all the students did all the exercises (see N in table 3 below for the number of students who did each exercise). The students' distribution was quite normal as the following graph shows:

Graph 1: Distribution of the scores obtained by Moroccan students on Grammar Scan



A close look at the above graph reveals that most students, 44%, scored between 40 and 50% and that those who scored between 40 and 60% represent 88% with only 7% who scored less than 40%. The details of the results and their ranking in a descending way are as follows:

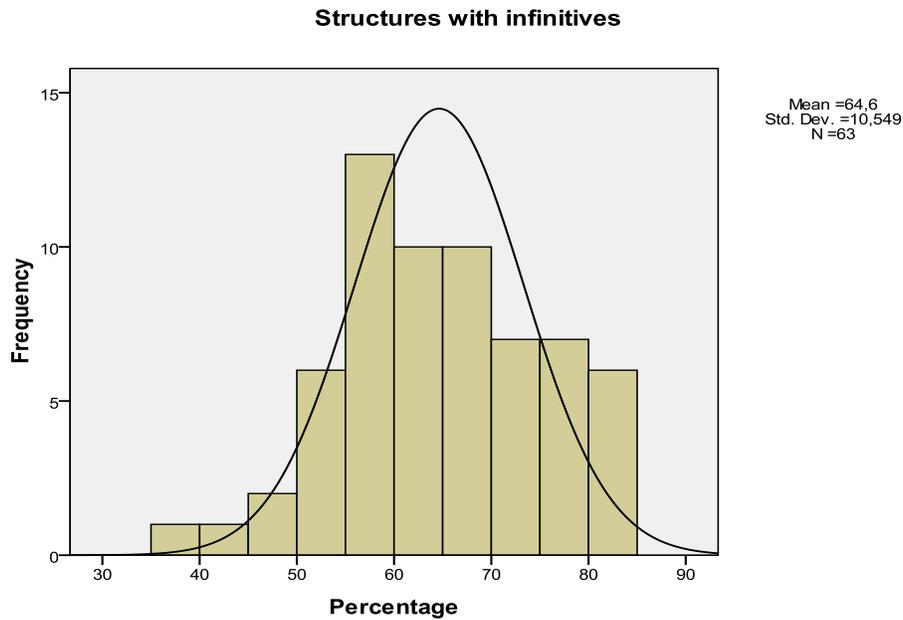
Table 3: Ranking of correctly answered grammar items

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	STD
Structures with infinitives	63	36	82	64.6	10.54
Relatives	28	37	77	61.22	8.71
Special sentence structures	27	35	75	56.57	9.74
Passives	58	6	82	55.28	15.22
Determiners 2: other determiners	33	39	68	54.82	7.31
ing-forms and past participles	63	26	74	54.28	9.62
Nouns	39	36	72	53.95	8.02
Pronunciation	25	10	81	53.52	21.35
Modal verbs 1	67	33	75	51.78	10.53
Words: other vocabulary problems	25	34	64	51.28	8.10
Social aspects of English	26	34	70	51.21	8.90
Questions, negatives and imperatives	28	33	75	50.98	10.06
Determiners 1: articles, possessives and demonstratives	35	34	72	50.86	8.20
Words 2: other confusable words	25	37	67	50.03	9.27
Spoken grammar	27	33	64	49.38	5.927
Verbs: some special structures	45	17	67	49.1	10.16
Adjectives and adverbs	30	2	63	48.1	13.54
Linking words ; verbs in subordinate clauses	28	34	67	48.05	9.92
Pronouns	36	13	81	47.76	12.76
Indirect speech	28	28	72	47.41	10.75
If	28	24	65	47.06	10.28
Words 1: similar words	26	25	69	46.05	10.99
Comparison	28	19	67	45	11.07
Present and future verbs	68	15	76	42.06	13.43
Modal verbs 2	64	19	65	40.27	11.98
Auxiliary verbs	68	20	80	39.85	12.87
Past and perfect verbs	68	20	62	39.26	10.17
Prepositions	28	22	47	36.83	6.23
Special kinds of English	24	13	60	35.28	12.18
Numbers	26	9	68	33.63	12.66

The N column stands for the number of students who took each test. Actually, there is no correlation between the number of students who took the tests and the scores ($r=-.005$). It is thus very unlikely that the students avoided some tests because they were difficult.

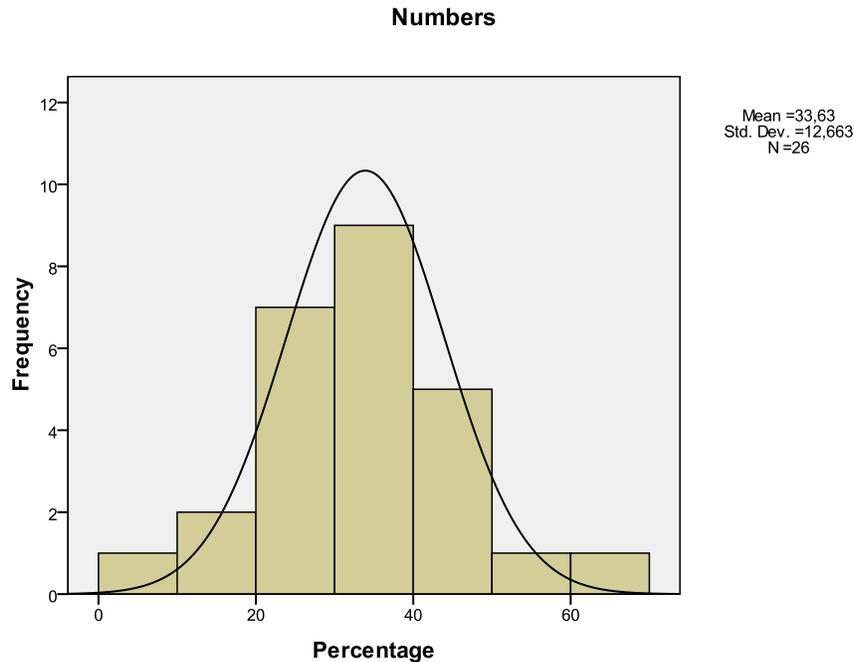
The test with the highest mean is the *Structures with Infinitives* and here are the details:

Graph 2: Distribution of the scores in the test with the highest scores



An explanation for the students’ good performance on this test can be attributed to the saliency of the questions in this test together with the frequency of this activity in the grammar input. However, the test with the lowest scores is that of *Numbers*:

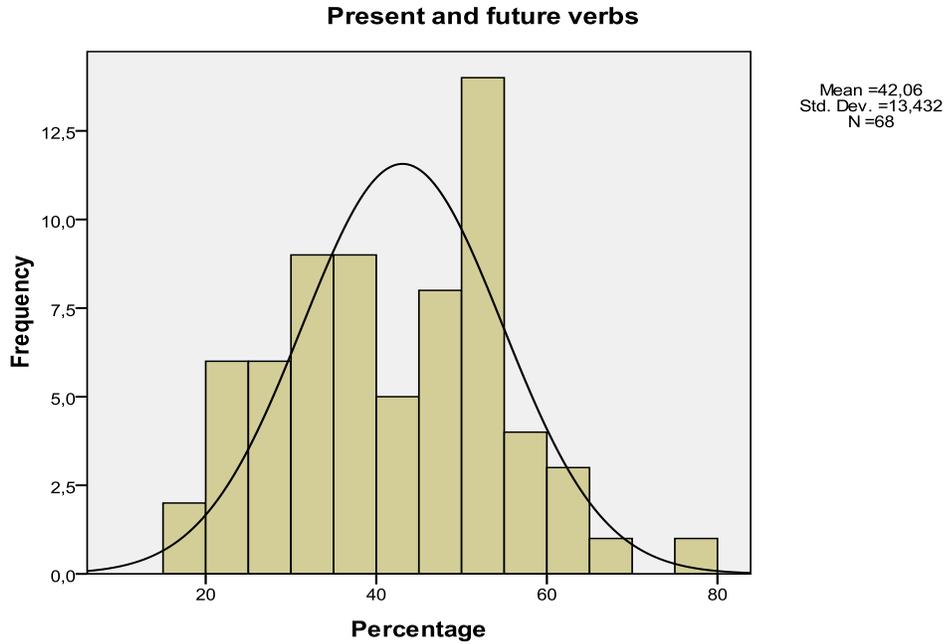
Graph 3: Distribution of the scores in the test with the lowest scores



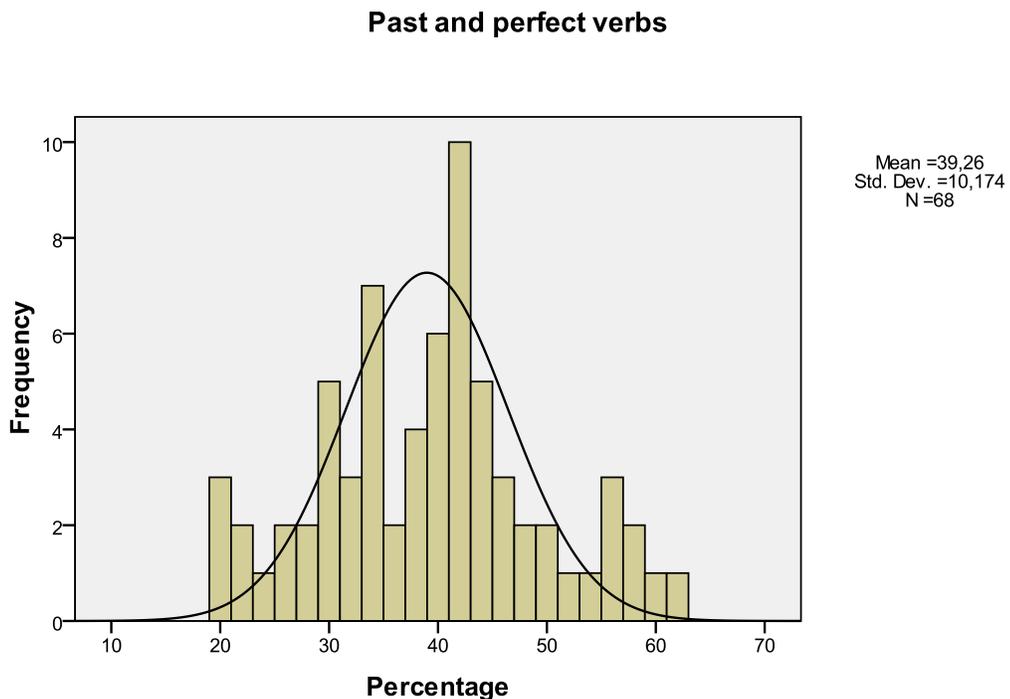
The low scores can be attributed to the fact that students are not familiar with such exercises as they were not part of their grammar syllabi.

Of the thirty tests, the students showed a lot of variations in two tests which are related to tenses:

Graph 4: Distribution of the scores of the Present and Future Verbstest



Graph 5: Distribution of the scores of the Past and Perfect Verbs test



These variations reflect the different levels demonstrated by the students in their acquisition of tenses especially the past and perfect tenses (see the discussion above) and related

items such as indirect speech. Ironically, the tenses are the most taught items as the curricula in the secondary school system in Morocco are structurally based on them together with the big amount of time allotted to these items in the tertiary level and large space they take in grammar textbooks. It should be admitted that there are structures with larger standard deviations but their ranges are smaller than that of the structure in Graphs 4 and 5 or their distributions are not as scattered.

In the light of the above findings, the answers to the research questions come to the following: the students retain various grammatical items, though in varying degrees, after an interval of nearly a year after their formal learning of grammar. They show enough knowledge of grammar to enable them to operate quite confidently in English but this knowledge needs output instruction in the framework of form-function-context mappings so that it can be reflected in their performance, oral or written. It seems that explicit instruction, to answer the second research question, has helped with some structures but not with others. Some structures were also acquired implicitly, which leaves enough room for implicit instruction.

4. Discussion of the findings

The results show that only some structures that have been covered, both in secondary and tertiary levels, have been adequately acquired by the students in the study. The latter use structures which have not been formally taught in class more accurately than others that have been taught, practiced and tested in class; namely tenses (past and present simple and continuous), modals (past and present), and conditionals (real and unreal). Also, despite the amount of time and energy spent on certain structures, their acquisition may require to be taught otherwise. Modals, for example, are taught for about four to five weeks at a rate of three hour-classes a week. An equally important amount of time is devoted to conditionals with around three three-hour classes. The students under study fail to show full mastery of the grammatical structures targeted by the syllabus. Instead, they have shown a fair grasp of grammatical structures that were not targeted by the syllabus. Given the varied input to which they were exposed, through formal instruction such as content classes delivered in English, assigned readings and research or through incidental learning through movies and radio, the Internet and social media, they may have informally acquired the grammatical structures in which they scored higher. This finding backs up the idea that grammar knowledge can be developed through both explicit and implicit approaches. The role of explicit instruction has been highlighted in the literature (see review of the literature above) but the role of implicit instruction should not be neglected.

However the variable of context should not be neglected in the teaching of grammar. Mallia (2014), while investigating Sudanese students' preferences between inductive or deductive approaches to the teaching of grammar and referring to previous research in the Middle East, reports that "... fewer *a priori* generalizations should be made about any single approach being a suitable 'one size fits all', notwithstanding the large volume of literature about approaches adopted for teaching grammar globally, including the Middle East ..." (p. 223). He found that deductive and inductive approaches did not bring any significant differences in students' outcomes after his experiment, though the students overwhelmingly showed preference to deductive delivery. He thus calls for adopting any approach but the key to effective delivery is to account for contextualisation through providing socially-relevant examples. Particularly in the Moroccan setting, the context plays an important role in the teaching and learning of grammar. As mentioned above, the students in this study had already learned two languages, classical

Arabic and French, before taking English. They learned grammars of the two languages through explicit instruction with an enormous tendency to the deductive approach. They were also deductively assessed and a quick look at the textbooks of Arabic and French in primary and secondary levels will provide evidence for this. Therefore the explicit instruction will prevail in the teaching of grammar in the departments of English as long as the same approach is adopted in earlier levels of schooling. Added to this, is that their professors all learned grammar through explicit learning and therefore they are likely to favour it in their teaching.

Also, Moroccan students seem to share many challenges related to some grammatical items with ESL / EFL learners in general and Arab students in particular. The challenges of the structures like tense, article, and preposition systems in English suggest that the sources of such difficulties are the same and therefore further research is needed to understand them more in the hope of working out promising improvements.

5. Recommendations

The discussions above have questioned the effectiveness of the input of grammar both in secondary and tertiary levels. Actually, the Moroccan students study most of the structures in the secondary school system and reinforce these structures in the tertiary level. The weakness exists in the lack of horizontal and vertical coordination. There are no links, or any official mechanisms, which create bridges between secondary school and tertiary systems in Morocco. These two levels of schooling belong to two different ministries with hardly any interface between them. Similarly, the lack of bridges occurs across the subjects. While in the secondary system, the links are created through the textbooks being implemented, the tertiary level input remains compartmentalized. In order for the students to make use of the input provided by the grammar professor, they should see its relevance in the writing, reading, and speaking classes. There is also scarcity of research in university or secondary teaching practices and especially research based on experimentation. The limited available body of research is generally done to get degrees and is shelved in respective institutions' libraries. Added to all these is that the small amount of research done in Departments of English Studies deals mainly with cultural, literary, and recently media issues following the orientations of the professors working in each department.

Teacher professional development should be given due attention in Morocco within a holistic approach to teaching different subjects. It should be put in the fore in tenure and promotion schemes. The scientific community in Morocco should issue documents for novice as well as experienced teachers in order to give guidance of how to teach each subject together with how to create connections across other subjects. For example, in the teaching of grammar, the documents will tackle the different approaches to its teaching:

- Theoretical bases of the teaching of grammar
- Form-function-context mappings to explain that the teaching of grammar involves more than the teaching of grammar rules
- Focus on form and focus on forms
- Explicit and implicit instruction
- Deductive and inductive approaches to teaching grammar.

It should be noted that the above activities and approaches to the teaching of grammar should be taken from complementary perspectives rather than from mutually exclusive choices. Put simply, they should be taken from the *both / and* rather than *either / or* perspective. Added to these issue are the following:

- The criteria that make some structures more difficult to acquire than others
- How to connect grammar to other subjects
- Teaching grammar through other tasks / skills: task-based instruction, listening, writing, reading etc.
- State-of-the art overviews of the teaching of grammar to Arab students in general and to Moroccan students in particular.
- Corrective feedback and its impact on grammar acquisition to know which errors to correct, when, and how.
- How to test grammar

All the aforementioned items need in-depth discussions and investigations in the Moroccan context in order for the Moroccan teachers to understand the complexities of English grammar structures and act accordingly.

6. Limitations and future research

Like any other study, this one has limitations. One of these limitations has to do with the size of the sample which is too small to be representative. Besides, a more comprehensive study in which students, teachers, and curricula are involved is needed to come to more revealing findings. For example, teachers and students should provide interesting qualitative and quantitative information that will help with more in-depth understanding of grammar acquisition and delivery. Moreover, grammar acquisition can be checked through grammar tests or through students' performance in other skills, especially writing.

Another limitation is related to the test being used in this study. While it was designed for checking the mastery of the content of a certain book with its key suggesting self-study use, knowing its entire content is far from being an index of English grammar mastery. Also, being by nature a diagnostic test, it cannot, and should not, be used for gauging achievements in grammar acquisition. Also its format, mainly based on grammaticality judgement items, may not be the only suitable way for checking grammar knowledge. Grammaticality judgement has been proved to be problematic for such an exercise even for native speakers with a high level of instruction (see the body of research reported in Lennon, 1991; Bartram and Walton, 1991; James, 1977, 1994, 1998; and Moulin, 1998 *inter alia*s). Added to these is the novelty of this type of test to the Moroccan students. However, its diversity and comprehensiveness are the motives of selecting it in our study. Other types of tests and triangulation in data collection should be envisaged in future studies.

Conclusion

Despite its limitations, this study shows that the teaching of grammar still needs more improvements to attain aspired results in Morocco. The results of the diagnostic test already indicate the usefulness of explicit instruction, even in the long term, and the importance of implicit input. However, more structuring of such inputs will lead to far better results.

The findings of this study are in line with those in previous research. This shows that Morocco shares the same, almost identical, linguistic system with North African countries and to a large extent many similar features with the Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Therefore, there is a room for collaborating to face common challenges.

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Appendix

Grammar syllabi in Semesters 1 to 4 in Moroccan universities	<i>Grammar Scan</i> components (number of questions)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parts of speech - Articles - Nouns - Adjectives - Adverbs - Prepositions - Conjunctions - Quantifiers - Verbs: Tenses: present tenses; past and perfect tenses; the future; conditional; present simple and continuous present perfect simple and continuous past perfect simple & continuous; future time: going to; present simple; present continuous; will+inf.; Future continuous; Future perfect Conditionals; tenses and conditionals in context. - Linking words - Modals - Conditionals - Modals: past time reference, present form ; continuous form; perfect form; negation of modality verb - Passives - Reported speech - Relative clauses - Phrases : types (noun, adjective, adverb, prepositional), and functions (subject, object, complement) - Clauses (relatives, defining, non-defining) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Present and future verbs (11 questions) - Past and perfect verbs (18) - Auxiliary verbs (10) - Modal verbs 1 (21) - Modal verbs 2 (8) - Structures with infinitives (18) - <i>ing</i>-forms and past participles (18) - Passives (11) - Verbs: some special structures (13) - Nouns (24) - Pronouns (13) - Determiners 1 : articles, possessives and demonstratives (16) - Determiners 2: other determiners (20) - Adjectives and adverbs (17) - Comparison (11) - Prepositions (9) - Questions, negatives and imperatives (12) - Linking words ; verbs in subordinate clauses (16) - If (11) - Indirect speech (9) - Relatives (14) - Special sentence structures (17) - Spoken grammar (7) - Special kinds of English (8) - Social aspects of English (12) - Pronunciation (6) - Numbers (14) - Words 1: similar words (10) - Words 2: other confusable words (18) - Words 3: other vocabulary problems (18)