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Effective Methods for Teaching English Grammar to University EFL Learners in Saudi Arabia: A Comparative Study of Inductive and Deductive Approaches

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Abstract

This study is a comparative investigation of the impact of inductive and deductive teaching approaches. The aim of this study is to investigate which approach to teaching grammar was more effective for helping Saudi Arabian EFL undergraduate students acquire grammatical proficiency in English. A second objective was to shed light on the students' preferences between the two approaches. The study is significant as the findings of this research can contribute to improved student outcomes by suggesting the best teaching strategy for Saudi students to learn English grammar. The author seeks to address the following question: Do inductive and deductive teaching approaches have similar effects on Saudi university-level EFL students' learning of English grammar? A quantitative research design was employed with a sample of 42 undergraduate EFL university students, who were divided into an inductive group and a deductive group. Their knowledge of English grammar was assessed with pre- post-treatment tests, followed by administration of a Likert scale questionnaire eliciting the students' perceptions of these approaches. The results indicated a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.0025$) favoring the inductive group. This outcome suggests that the positive impact of the inductive approach exceeded that of the deductive approach. The students' preference results revealed that they slightly preferred the inductive approach, but the difference between groups was not statistically significant. These findings suggest that university students should learn grammar inductively. Additionally, teachers and researchers should be encouraged to incorporate an inductive teaching approach in their curricula and studies to enhance learning outcomes.

Keywords: Deductive approach, EFL undergraduates, grammar teaching, inductive approach, learners' perceptions

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Introduction

Background

Learning a new language involves developing an increasingly detailed understanding of its grammar. Lock (1997) described grammar as the formal rules that govern the accepted usage of a language, including the organization of words and the internal composition of those words. Similarly, Purpura (2004) defined grammar as "a set of structural rules, patterns, norms, or conventions that govern the construction of well-formed and meaningful utterances with respect to specific language use contexts" (P. 2). However, as noted by Bastone (1994), grammar is a multifaceted process that can serve as a formal mechanism for enhancing structural accuracy, a tool for communicating meanings, or a dynamic resource that serves various purposes in different contexts over time. Thus, in any situation, one's capacity to communicate clearly requires a command of grammar.

Language teachers use many different techniques to help their students become linguistically competent in the target language, such as English as a Foreign Language (EFL), learning which has become a global necessity (Huang, 2005). To help students become linguistically competent, teaching grammar in a lesson is crucial. Also, EFL teachers should assist their pupils in producing correct forms as well as the pronunciation of English words (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Thus, effective methods of teaching English grammar are crucial to students' development of proficiency, accuracy, and fluency in their target language (Ellis, 2006). For example, many forms of English verbs express specific tenses, and without a grasp of their use, learners may mistakenly refer to something in the present tense that had happened in the past, resulting in the misrepresentation of their meaning. Because students may benefit to varying degrees from different teaching methods, it is vital to determine which approach is best for a particular group of learners, such as whether to teach grammar inductively or deductively, an enduring debate in language teaching (Hammerly, 1975).

For a clear understanding of this issue, it is necessary to distinguish between the two approaches. The inductive method begins by giving learners concrete instances of language use in which they may observe grammatical patterns and norms in instruction. In this approach, students use sentence or text analysis to infer grammatical rules on their own. For example, a teacher can explain simple present tense without giving the students a rule but instead examples from which they derive it. The deductive method, on the other hand, begins with explicit teaching of linguistic rules, followed by application and practice. Therefore, these two approaches are the opposite of each other.

The inductive approach has a long history. Jan Comenius, who was a highly popular English teacher in the 17th century, introduced the approach and used it in his teaching throughout, for 1631 to 1658 (Celce-Murcia, 1991). Before this, a classic, teacher-centered deductive approach to grammar instruction was common (Rivers & Temperley, 1978), whereas the more modern, learner-centered inductive approach demonstrated grammatical rules within authentic language contexts.

Among researchers who compared the advantages and disadvantages of inductive and deductive approaches, Ausubel (1964) considered the former too difficult for weaker students. However, Shaffer (1989) argued that these students can benefit from the inductive approach. Widodo (2006) pointed out that inductive approach is time consuming, so on one hand, students could continue to misunderstand the rule or get frustrated, but on the other hand, this learner-

centered method could increase their critical thinking, problem-solving, and motivation. Donalo et al. (2017) stated that, on the one hand, organizing and teaching inductive lessons could be too time-consuming. Still, on the other hand, they offered the advantage of stimulating learners' thinking as they actively sought to understand how grammar functions as well as allowing the instructor to take note of the queries raised by the pupils and rectify their mistakes as needed. Younie (1974) pointed out another advantage, which was that students tend to remember rules they have learned inductively because they discovered the rules by themselves.

On the other hand, according to Mountone (2004), to help students learn the rules quickly and precisely, deductive procedures appear to be the most effective. Also, Younie (1974) contended that the outcome of this approach is more predictable as the instructor chooses the content and the order in which rules are presented, and Robinson (1996) claimed that it is generally more successful. However, Widodo (2006) pointed out that the deductive approach may have detrimental effects on younger students, and as a teacher-centered approach, it may result in fewer students participating and interacting with one another, which is essential for language learning. Moreover, Petrovitz (1997) argued that this approach lacks meaningful context. The debate concerning the teaching of grammar inductively or deductively continues to the present day.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study was to investigate which approach to teaching grammar, inductive or deductive, was more effective for helping Saudi Arabian EFL undergraduate students acquire grammatical proficiency in English. A second goal was to shed light on the students' preferences between the two approaches.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because of the importance of acquiring English grammar for Saudi EFL students. They have been taught by traditional deductive methods until now, when the question has arisen as to whether inductive approaches might be more supportive of their learning. Thus, the findings of this research can contribute to improved student outcomes by suggesting the best teaching strategy for Saudi students to learn English grammar. This research is the first to compare how inductive and deductive teaching methods affect Saudi first-year university students' English grammar learning. Hence, this research adds to the literature on target language grammar teaching in particular contexts.

Literature Review

The findings of prior studies comparing the impact of inductive and deductive methodologies on second and foreign language learning have yielded mixed outcomes. Some studies indicate that inductive methods yield superior results for learners, such as Abdugarimova and Zubaydova (2021), Badpa (2024), Eriksson (2014), Gorat and Prijambodo (2013), Gulsanam (2024), Haight et al., (2007), Jong-Won, (2007), Kaur and Niwas (2016), Kuder (2009), Rauf et al. (2023), and Vogel et al. (2011). However, other researchers have found that deductive teaching methods result in better learning outcomes than inductive methods, such as Negahdaripour and Amirghassemi (2016), and Moranski and Zalbidea, (2022). In other studies, such as Mahjoob (2015), Sik (2015), and Nur (2020), the two approaches have not been found to differ at a significant level.

Research Supporting the Inductive Approach

Employing a pre- and post-test design, Rauf et al. (2023), found that students who were taught inductively demonstrated superior performance in learning verb tenses and modal verbs than those who were taught deductively. As a result, they recommended implementing an inductive approach to teaching English to undergraduates.

In an exploration of the advantages of teaching grammar through inductive methods, Gulsanam (2024) found that the inductive approach promotes active participation and improves students' understanding, memory, and analytical abilities, as well as dramatically enhances their grammatical proficiency and general language skills. The researcher therefore recommended that this method should be widely used in language education. To investigate the efficacy of teaching English grammar using deductive and inductive approaches, Kaur and Niwas (2016) divided 70 university-level English learners into two groups for comparison and found that the inductive teaching approach significantly improved student performance. Similarly, Abdugarimova and Zubaydova (2021) compared the effects of the two instructional approaches on the English grammar learning of 58 high school students and reported that those who learned inductively achieved better outcomes than those who learned deductively.

In a study comparing inductive and deductive methods for teaching grammar to 65 high school EFL learners in Iran, Badpa (2024) found that the 33 students, who were taught inductively outperformed the 32 students who were taught deductively and were more satisfied with their teaching method.

Research Supporting the Deductive Approach

In a study involving 138 Spanish learners from three high schools, Moranski and Zalbidea (2022) examined the outcomes of inductive and deductive methods for teaching Spanish grammar and found that the deductive method more effectively enhanced students' precision when making acceptability judgments. After comparing the effects of deductive and inductive instruction on Iranian pre-intermediate EFL students' accurate and fluent use of the three basic English tenses, Negahdaripour and Amirghassemi (2016) reported that the deductive approach produced noticeably higher accuracy in two of the tenses, suggesting that it might benefit EFL learners more.

Research Supporting Neither the Deductive nor the Inductive Approach

Using quantitative and qualitative methods, Nur (2020) examined language learners' perceptions of the two teaching methods in a grammar course at UIN Alauddin Makassar. Data collected through surveys and interviews indicated that students held comparably favorable opinions about both approaches.

Mahjoob (2015) studied the comparative efficacy of inductive and deductive approaches to teaching English grammar in Shiraz, Iran. The study involved 60 EFL students at the intermediate level, 30 of whom were taught by inductive and 30 by deductive methods. The findings revealed no statistically significant difference in learning outcomes, contrary to the researcher's initial expectation that the inductive approach would yield superior results.

Method

In this research, a quantitative methodology was utilized to investigate the effects of inductive and deductive teaching approaches on Saudi EFL students' learning of English grammar

and their preferences between the two methods. The following two research questions guided the study:

1. Do inductive and deductive teaching approaches have similar effects on Saudi university-level EFL students' learning of English grammar?
2. What are the students' perceptions of teaching grammar inductively and deductively?

Participants

In the fall semester of the 2024-2025 academic year, a sample of 42 first-year undergraduate students in the English Language Department at Majmaah University in Saudi Arabia was divided into two groups of 21 students, designated the experimental (taught inductively) and control (taught deductively) groups. The students' ages ranged from 18-20, and all were native speakers of Arabic. Both groups were trained by the author. As a teacher/researcher, I taught both groups. The content taught was the English past tense, with which learners are known to struggle (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Ellis et al., 2006).

Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved the administration of two types of instruments. The first was a set of equivalent pre-and post-tests, the former implemented at the beginning of the study to establish baseline scores and that the two groups were comparable in English proficiency, and the latter after two weeks of instruction to examine the effects of each group's designated instructional approach. The second tool was a Likert-scale questionnaire, which was completed by both groups immediately after the post-test. At the end of the intervention, a t-test was applied to the pre-and post-test results to establish any differences in the two groups' learning outcomes. In accordance with Hatch and Lazaraton (1991), $p < 0.05$, the usual threshold in applied linguistics research, was used to determine statistical significance. As a teacher-researcher, I developed these tests, which were validated by a process in which three English professors examined them and provided feedback on such aspects as question structure and grammatical evaluation, which were used to guide revisions.

Procedures

The students were divided into two groups: the inductive group and the deductive group. A pretest was given to the participants at the beginning of the experiment to assess their previous understanding of the English past tense. Both groups attended four lessons aimed at teaching the English past tense over the course of the two-week experiment. The inductive group was taught using an inquiry-based approach, which enabled them to discover rules through examples and exercises. However, the deductive group was given clear teaching, followed by practice assignments to enhance their understanding. After two weeks, a post-test was given to assess the participants' comprehension and memory retrieval of the English past tense. Finally, both groups were given a survey to assess students' preferences between the two teaching methods and elicit insights into their perceptions.

Results

Table one shows the means, standard deviations, and the t-test results of the pre-tests for both groups.

Table 1. *The pre-test means, standard deviations, and T-test results for both groups*

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p-value
Pre-test	Deductive	21	7.57	4.31	-0.14	40	0.887
	Inductive	21	7.76	4.39			

Table one shows the mean scores (7.57 for the Deductive group and 7.76 for the Inductive group) as well as the Std. Deviations were almost the same, indicating that the two groups had equivalent English grammar proficiency at the outset of the intervention ($p = 0.887$).

Findings Concerning the Initial Research Question

As shown in Figure one, the Inductive group achieved a higher post-test means score than the Deductive group, indicating that the students who taught grammar with an inductive method outperformed those who received instruction using a deductive approach.

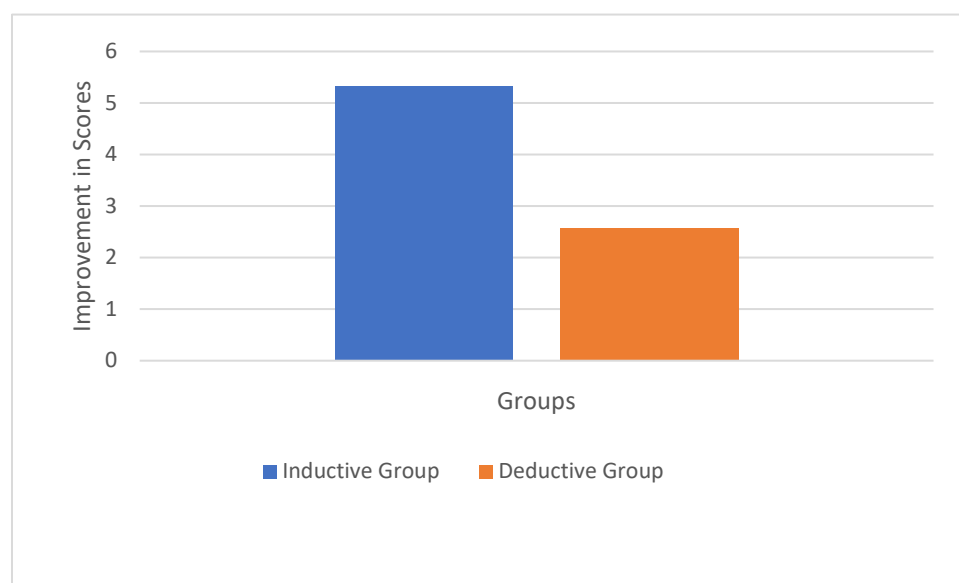


Figure 1. Improvement in Test Scores of Deductive & Inductive Groups

Table two shows the post-test results for both groups:

Table 2. *Post-test Means, Standard deviations, and T-test Results for Both Groups*

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p-value
Post-test	Deductive	21	10.14	3.86	-3.22	40	0.0025
	Inductive	21	13.10	1.64			

As shown in Table two, the post-test mean score of the Inductive group (13.10) was higher than that of the Deductive group (10.14) at a statistically significant level ($p = 0.0025$). This outcome suggests that the positive impact of the inductive approach exceeded that of the deductive approach.

Findings Concerning the Second Research Question

As shown in Figure two, a 5-point Likert-scale survey was conducted to compare the students' levels of agreement with each of the two methods of teaching grammar. The questions were designed to gauge students' preferences between the two teaching methods and elicit insights into their perceptions.

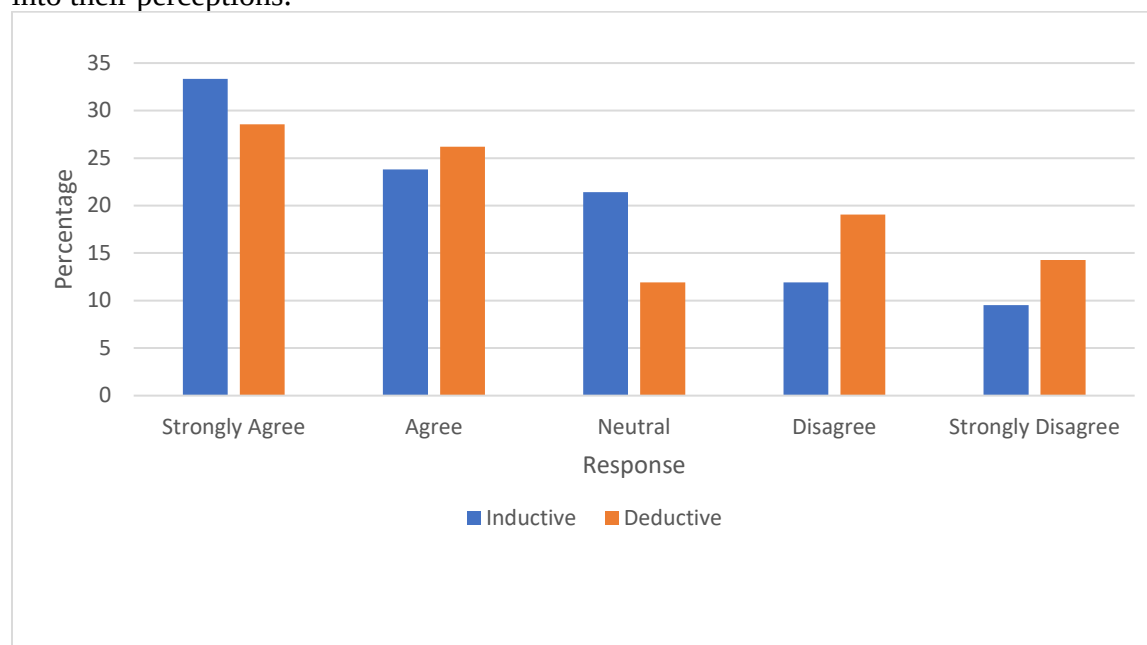


Figure 2. Comparison of Learners' Preferences Between Deductive & Inductive Approaches

Figure two shows that the students were more likely to strongly agree with the inductive approach (33.33%) than the deductive approach (28.57%). They were also more likely to feel neutral toward the inductive approach (21.43%) than the deductive method (11.90%). Disagreement levels, on the other hand, showed that fewer disagreed (11.90%) or strongly disagreed (9.52%) with the inductive approach than disagreed (19.05%) or strongly disagreed (14.29%) with the deductive approach. Overall, the learners showed a preference for the inductive approach but not, as shown in Table 3, at a statistically significant level.

Table 3. The Means, Standard Deviations, and T-test results for the Two Groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p-value
Independent samples t-test	Deductive	42	3.357	1.445	0.786	82	0.4337
	Inductive	42	3.595	1.326			

Table three shows that students tended to agree with the inductive (Mean = 3.595) slightly more than the deductive approach (Mean = 3.357). Both means, however, are relatively near the neutral position on the Likert scale, indicating a moderate level of agreement with each method and a small indication of preference for the inductive approach that is not statistically significant ($t = 0.786$, $p = 0.4337$).

Discussion

It is worth noting again that the two groups began the intervention with comparable levels of English grammar proficiency, and both groups improved in grammar proficiency but not to the same extent.

Discussion Concerning the Initial Research Question

Regarding the first question, which addresses whether inductive and deductive teaching approaches result in the same or different grammar learning outcomes for Saudi university-level EFL students, the findings indicate a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.0025$) favoring the inductive group. That is, the students who learned grammar through the inductive way outperformed those who knew it through the deductive method.

This result is consistent with my initial expectation that giving students opportunities to discover rules through exercises and examples would prove more effective than giving them rules and practice applying them. The inductive approach may be compared to the way a computer allows students to arrange information in the way that best serves their understanding and memory. Conversely, giving rules initially could be compared to pre-programming a particular organization on students' computers, which could stifle their understanding and retention. Moreover, the inductive approach encourages students to become more self-reliant by discovering rules by themselves, which also can increase their cognitive depth.

The finding of this study that the inductive approach facilitates students' understanding and retention more than the deductive approach is compatible with previous studies (e.g., Abdugarimova & Zubaydova, 2021; Badpa, 2024; Donalo et al., 2017; Gulsanam, 2024; Kaur & Niwas, 2016; Rauf et al., 2023; Vogel et al., 2011; Younie, 1974).

Discussion Concerning the Second Research Question

Learners' perceptions of teaching grammar inductively and deductively were investigated to provide further insight into the best approach to teaching grammar to Saudi university-level EFL students. The result reveals that learners showed a moderate preference for the inductive method, but the t-test result on their questionnaire responses ($t = 0.786$, $p = 0.4337$) indicated that the preferences for the two approaches did not differ at a statistically significant level. This result is consistent with Nur (2020), who found that learners preferred both approaches. However, some other researchers (e.g., Mallia, 2014) have found that learners prefer being taught deductively.

Conclusion

Gaining a solid comprehension of a language's grammar is crucial to learning it. Accordingly, the present study was an investigation of whether there are significant differences between inductive and deductive instructional methods' impact on the grammatical understanding of Saudi university level EFL students. The findings show that after the intervention, learners who

were taught inductively outperformed those taught deductively in grammar knowledge at a statistically significant level, indicating that Saudi university students should learn grammar inductively. Regarding these students' preferences for grammar instruction, even though they slightly favored the inductive approach, this result was not statistically significant, indicating a moderate preference for each approach. Overall, the study demonstrates the importance of investigating the actual outcomes of different instructional methods to teaching particular groups of language learners and of exploring their preferences among approaches.

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