Arab World English Journal
INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL ISSN: 2229-9327

Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Volume 16. Number 2, June 2025 Pp.96-115
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol16no2.6

"Teach It, and Then Set Me Free": Saudi EFL Learners' Voice and Choice in Grammar Pedagogies

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Received:02/12/2025 Accepted:06/ 02/2025 Published:06/26/2025

Abstract
While beneficiary satisfaction is getting significant traction in academic discourse, learners' voices in EFL classrooms remain largely overlooked, highlighting a critical gap in second-language education. Explicit and implicit grammar instruction research, for example, is mainly informed and shaped by reductionist performance-based queries or teachers' reflections on past practices, all while leaving a critical element, the learner, behind. The current study aims to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of Saudi EFL learners attending a Saudi University (i.e., the University of Jeddah) after being exposed to three different modes of grammar instruction: explicit, implicit, and differentiated, for three weeks, twice a week, in sixty-minute sessions. After the sessions, five students from each instructional group (a total of 15) were randomly selected for comprehensive interviews, during which the study's main constructs (e.g., explicit and implicit distinctions) were introduced in simplified and relevant terms. The results suggest that differentiated instruction was perceived as the most effective form of teaching (as it was associated with interesting themes like guided autonomy and useful learner-condition or form-condition interactions), followed by implicit instruction (with themes like self-regulated autonomy, authenticity, and involvement standing out) and, finally, explicit instruction (the effectiveness of which is mainly controlled by form-complexity). These results have some important implications for the field of second language teaching.
Keywords: Differentiated instruction; explicit instruction; grammar teaching, implicit instruction; language education, learners' lived experiences

How to cite: AlAmir, B. A. (2025). "Teach It, and Then Set Me Free": Saudi EFL Learners' Voice and Choice in Grammar Pedagogies. *Arab World English Journal, 16*(2): 96-115. https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol16no2.6

Introduction

One of the classic debates in second language research is the question of why (unlike first language acquisition) success in second language learning differs considerably from one individual to another (Hulstijn, 2005; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). One assumption made to address this question is the premise that second language learning is controlled by many factors, mainly those of learners' individual differences (Brown, 2006). Language teachers often come across students from different educational backgrounds, learning at different paces, handling abstract ideas in various ways, and, above all, having different needs and abilities. Ellis (2009), for example, has described a situation where teachers might have two types of learners in a language classroom: A) learners who can use a specific L2 feature fluently without having any metalinguistic awareness of the rules underlying their utterances and vice versa; B) learners who can verbalize the rules, yet are unable to apply them in real-life communications. To address this issue of variance, scholars and educators in the field have been experimenting with different instructional designs tailored to the needs of either type A or type B learners but not always to a class full of both (see Norris & Ortega, 2000 or Spada & Tomita, 2010; for a comprehensive overview of explicit and implicit instruction research). Most of these studies are performance-based, placing more value on the outcome than on the unfolding process as experienced by students. The current study, therefore, is driven by a specific interest in the way learners perceive binary (either-or) and differentiated forms of instruction.

Literature review

A review of the current body of literature on explicit and implicit instruction suggests that most studies conducted are mainly informed by reductionist views of teaching while dismissing the role of learning in general and some specific relevant notions, such as learners' individual differences. When defining explicit and implicit instruction, for example, Norris and Ortega (2000) referred to explicit instruction as a type of teaching that involves a direct presentation of rules or activities that require learners to attend to specific linguistic forms. Implicit instruction, on the other hand, was described as involving none of the above. Central to both definitions, then, is getting students to consciously examine and attend to the form without questioning whether they have the necessary attentional resources or sufficient working memory capacity to process it without paying close attention. This missing part of the puzzle might explain why there is no clear-cut answer to which type of instruction (explicit or implicit) is more effective than the other, as will be mentioned next. An alternative solution to this issue, as suggested by Ellis (2009), is to stop adopting the "either-or" binary approach to grammar teaching and to combine both forms of teaching as a form of differentiated instruction, which initially came as a response to learners' diversity and individual differences (Tomlinson, 2017).

While research on explicit and implicit distinctions dates back to the origins of educational theories, differentiated instruction has emerged as a reform to address the rigidity of traditional teaching methods in contemporary mixed-ability classrooms. Tomlinson (2017) and Joseph (2013) defined it as a proactive method of teaching that takes into account learners' diverse abilities, interests, and learning profiles (Joseph, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017). It revolves around understanding that students are different and addressing their needs while disregarding what has long been known as "one-size-fits-all" instruction (Subban, 2006). The fixed "either-or" use of explicit and implicit instruction, in the case of this study, is believed to meet the description of this one-size-fits-all notion as it assumes that by using either explicit or implicit instruction, everyone will be able to

fit in. Nevertheless, it dismisses the possibility that some students might achieve better outcomes when exposed to the other.

Overview of Experimental Explicit and Implicit Instruction Research

Experimental research studies that focused on the impact of explicit and implicit instruction on grammar learning fall under three categories: 1) studies that favor the former (e.g., Robinson 1996), 2) studies that lean more toward the latter (e.g., Herron & Tomasello, 1992) 3) studies that perceive both approaches as equally useful, regardless of which one is better (e.g., Andringa et al. 2011; Doughty, 1991). A meta-analytical review by Norris and Ortega (2000) of these studies showed that the majority, in fact, favor explicit instruction. Ellis (2009), nonetheless, has two concerns regarding these results. First, he believes that most studies included in the review only examined the knowledge gained under specific conditions that favored a particular type of learning. Second, the measures used to elicit implicit/explicit knowledge, as he believes, were not doing what they should. He claims that most of these measures are biased toward explicit (declarative) language knowledge, which is why they failed to detect improvement in implicit procedural knowledge. Besides these two factors (measures and concept operationalization), researchers in the field identified two kinds of interactions that might also affect the way explicit and implicit instruction work, i.e., form-condition and learner-condition.

Other Mitigating factors

The role of explicit and implicit instruction research in language classrooms is controlled by two main factors: learners' individual differences and form complexity (Ellis, 2009). Williamson (2017) defined learners' individual differences as "the traits that distinguish individuals" (p. 1). Learners' traits determine how much they benefit from instruction, resulting in learner-condition interactions. An example of this kind of interaction is the correlation between working memory capacity and explicit instruction. According to Ellis (2009) and Green and Flower (2003), explicit instruction puts heavy demands on working memory, resulting in learners with high working memory capacity being more prone (than their colleagues) to benefit from explicit instruction. Green and Flower (2003) justified this association by explaining that when receiving explicit instruction on a specific rule, learners will be either 1) trying to memorize/recall the rule, 2) worrying about its application, or 3) using their attentional resources to discover and apply it, respectively (with the latter being even more cognitively demanding than the former.

The other type of interaction mentioned by Ellis (2009) is the one that occurs between form-complexity and instruction. Spada and Tomita (2010), in their meta-analytical study of explicit and implicit instruction research, defined this element as the number of transformations a form goes through. Based on this definition, it would be logical to assume, for example, that present tense verbs in third singular questions are more complex than the English articles because they involve more transformations. Some researchers (e.g., Robinson, 1996) believe explicit instruction is more effective when teaching simple grammar. Another study by Hulstijin and De Graff (1994), however, shows that it also works just fine with complex rules.

Perception-based Explicit and Implicit Instruction Research

In general

Although the use of explicit and implicit grammar instruction has received considerable attention from SLA researchers, most studies on their effectiveness are, in fact, experimental and

performance-based. Little attention was given to how these concepts were perceived by the individuals involved, teachers and students. This reluctance to seek their opinions is primarily caused by two factors: 1) the widely held assumption that students' opinions should not be equated with knowledge, and 2) the question of whether students can meet discriminant validity (i.e., the ability to differentiate between different forms of instruction) (Fauth et al., 2014). As a result, the validity and reliability of this area have been questioned more frequently compared to other research types (Spooren et al., 2013).

Among the few studies that explored this side of explicit and implicit instruction research is one conducted by Tavakoli and Zarrinabadi (2018) in the Iranian context. Using a mixed-method design, their study explored the effect of explicit and implicit feedback on students' willingness to communicate (WTC) through a classroom experiment and follow-up interviews with students. The results showed an alignment between learners' perceptions and their performance in the post-test tasks. Both have shown that implicit feedback did not impact students' willingness to communicate, whereas explicit feedback increased it. The interview data revealed that the increase in learners' WTC was attributed to their elevated self-perceived confidence, which is the feeling that a person is well-equipped with sufficient resources to perform a task at a particular time (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Students also reported that their motivation increased, and their anxiety decreased subsequently. The interview results also showed that students attached great significance to being explicitly corrected whenever making a mistake. According to them, explicit means of feedback (e.g., metalinguistic explanations of rules or attention-raising questioning techniques) worked as progress checks on their performance. This preference for explicit feedback and metalinguistic explanation of rules has also been perceived positively by students in Cornillie et al.'s (2012) study under one condition: being intrinsically motivated. The few learners who preferred implicit instruction described the overall experience as engaging and immersive.

In another study conducted to investigate learners' perceptions of grammar teaching in general, Sopin (2015) pointed out a noticeable variance in how learners perceive explicit and implicit instruction. This variance was driven by their varying proficiency levels and learning experiences. Although all students in their study emphasized the importance of explicit grammar instruction, they also noted that it is only effective at the early stages of language learning but not when learners are advanced. Other relevant themes that emerged from their responses were: 1) the disruption caused by explicit feedback to students' engagement with the lessons, 2) the importance of using explicit rules as references to communicate fluently with others, and 3) poor retention.

In a study conducted in the Turkish context, Başöz (2014) found that teachers perceive implicit instruction very positively because, as they believe, it promotes and assimilates authentic, real-life tasks rather than the rigid, superficial practices associated with explicit instruction. Those teachers, however, also placed great importance on acquiring explicit grammar knowledge as they believe it is a mediating factor in language development. To find a middle ground between the two critical concepts— authenticity and explicit grammar knowledge — they suggested that the best way to teach grammar is to blend both forms and focus on preparing students for real-life language use.

In the Saudi context

In the Saudi context, research on explicit and implicit instruction in EFL settings is generally experimental in design (e.g., AlHashmi & Elyas, 2018; Alsakaker, 2025; El-Dakhs et

al., 2022; Khan, 2024; Qari, 2021; Sabir, 2018). There seems, however, to be an emerging, yet still under-researched, interest in the following areas 1) responsive instruction (i.e., differentiated instruction) which takes into account learners' needs and differences (e.g., AlHashmi and Elyas, 2018) and 2) research studies that target perceptions of the people involved (e.g., Abduh & Algouzi, 2020; Alghanmi & Shukri, 2016; Alsakaker, 2025). The first two studies targeted university-level EFL teachers. Similar to the results of Başöz (2014), teachers in both studies seemed to perceive explicit knowledge of grammar as necessary. Although they explicitly stated that they were not in favor of explicit instruction, they perceived drilling activities and rule memorization as useful, which suggests an inner preference for explicit instruction. Another indication of this preference is their description of having students figure out the rules themselves (though they referred to it as implicit instruction) as efficient.

All in all, the results of Alghanmi and Shukri's (2016) and Abduh and Algouzi's (2020) studies show a clear preference for explicit instruction by EFL teachers (perceptions and practice wise). To the best of our knowledge, the only study that has explicitly targeted learners' perceptions of explicit and implicit instruction was conducted by Alsakaker (2025) using a Likert-scale questionnaire. Their results showed a general preference for inductive instructional methods. However, there was no other information available about which aspects of learners' lived experiences were targeted in the questionnaire, highlighting another gap in the current literature.

Summary and final remarks

At the end of this review of perception-based research on explicit and implicit instruction, we would like to highlight four important points. First, experimental performance-based research and perception-based research are believed to share a common thread. Both approaches significantly shape the overall picture of how effective explicit, implicit, and differentiated instruction is. As Seldin (1993) puts it, "the opinions of those who eat the dinner should be considered if we want to know how it tastes" (p. 40). Second, most studies that have focused on students' perceptions of explicit and implicit instruction have focused more on "what" method is preferred, while little has been said about why, especially in the Saudi context. Third, the only studies that have addressed this topic (i.e., the question of "why" a method is effective) in the Saudi context have only taken account of teachers' points of view. Shedding light on how students perceive both is equally important, as they are on the receiving end of the line. Last but not least, learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of instruction differ from one generation to another and from one context to another, including the linguistic context (Gass & Mackey, 2006). It is always recommended, therefore, to apply "multiple measures, multiple times, over multiple periods" to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching (Ferguson, 2012).

Methodology

Study Procedures

The data collection process consisted of three main stages: A. variable control (participant-wise), B. intervention (as a preliminary procedure), and C. interviewing (as the main research instrument). Below is a description of each stage, followed by an illustration of how the results were analyzed.

A. Variable Control: Participants

Three sections of female EFL students at the pre-intermediate level in their first year at the University of Jeddah were randomly selected for intervention. A placement test was first administered to students to ensure that all three groups would start the intervention on equal footing. This step was essential to eliminate any possibility of learners' Language Proficiency Level (LPL) affecting their responses. Although Table One shows slight variances in LPL, it also indicates that most participants are pre-intermediate-level learners, just as stated by the English Language Institute.

Table 1 *Participants' language proficiency level*

	Group A		Group B		Group C	
LPL	N	%	N	%	N	%
A1	5	17.9	8	20.5	5	13.2
A2	18	64.3	26	66.7	28	73.7
B1	5	17.9	5	12.8	5	13.2
Total	28		39		38	

A. Intervention

The three groups were then exposed to different modes of grammar instruction: explicit (EI), implicit (II), and differentiated (DI). The intervention lasted for three weeks, held twice weekly in sixty-minute sessions. The following table is a systematic summary of how each form of instruction was operationalized:

Table 2 *Operationalisation of explicit/ implicit/differentiated instructio*

	Content	Process	Product	Feedback
EI	Content was planned and determined beforehand. Based on input-enhancement (target elements were highlighted, underlined, or made bold).	Using metalinguistic terminology, learners' attention was directed to the form (which sometimes appeared in isolation) in a planned, obtrusive manner.	Controlled tasks (e.g., fill in the gap, multiple choice questions).	Metalinguistic explanation of the error.
II	Content was delivered spontaneously. Based on input enrichment (input-flood).	It involved attracting learners' attention indirectly to the form (which is almost always contextualized) in an incidental, non-obtrusive manner without any metalinguistic explanation.	Free production (e.g., story narration and descriptive tasks).	Recast
DI	Some parts of the content were planned while also leaving the doors open for variation and creation.	It involved indirect attempts to attract learners' attention to the form in context in a non-obtrusive manner, followed by gradual and planned attempts to direct their attention to the form in isolation using some metalinguistic explanation.	Promotes the use of both controlled and free-production tasks.	Mixed (depending on the task)

C. Reflection: One-on-one In-depth Interviews

At this stage, five random students from each group (a total of 15) were selected for in-depth phenomenological interviews. At the heart of this type of interviewing is understanding 1) the lived experience of a concept from the perspectives of people involved and 2) the meanings

they construct out of it (Ary et al., 2010). Those people are usually selected because they can share valuable thoughts and feelings better than anybody else. For this reason, it was decided that the interviews should be conducted right after the intervention. Once students have experienced it, it was easier for the researcher to define abstract concepts (which are not usually easy to understand) just by referring to what happened during class.

To carry out the interviews, Dolbeare and Schuman's (Seidman, 2006) three-interview series model was applied because it provides a comprehensive description of the phenomenon under study, focusing not only on the experience itself but also on what had happened before and what they think should follow. Unlike the original model (according to which each individual should be interviewed three times), this study opted to merge and combine all three interviews into a single one, structured as follows: 1) focused history, 2) details of the lived experience, and 3) reflection on the future. In the focused history part, participants' experiences were placed in context by asking them to elaborate on their past experience with the topic (e.g., how grammar was taught in previous school years). The second part targeted concrete details of the present intervention. The questions were semi-structured to ensure that the researcher did not unconsciously guide learners' responses. They were then asked to reflect on the usefulness of the instruction they received and share their thoughts on its advantages and disadvantages. In the third part, the participants were asked to draw their conclusions and final remarks on what they think should be done in the future.

Data Analysis

Coding in qualitative research can take either a top-down or a bottom-up approach to data analysis. The first, usually referred to as content analysis, starts with a set of categories in mind. In contrast, the other approach, referred to as thematic analysis, assumes that the categories should emerge from the text itself (Flick, 2018). In this study, a combination of both approaches was used for two main reasons. First, starting the analysis with the research questions (forming general categories) in mind will keep it focused and systematic without having to deal with significant deviations from the main goal, i.e., answering the research question. Second, conducting a subsequent thematic coding during which more categories emerge will add flexibility to the analysis. It will also contribute to the development of an agenda-free comprehensive report of results. The main reason for selecting one-to-one interviews with learners as a method has, in the first place, come as a response to the rigidity of experimental research designs and to explore other facets of reality as perceived by the individuals involved.

To illustrate how this mixed qualitative analysis was conducted, it is essential to first highlight the steps of both approaches— content and thematic analysis. According to Schreier (2014), any top-down content analysis should follow a sequence of procedures: establishing a research question as a start-point, selecting the data, coming up with a framework for coding, segmentation, preliminary coding, evaluating and modifying the codes, building the main analysis, presenting the results and finally interpreting the findings. The steps of bottom-up thematic analysis, however, are as follows: getting familiar with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing the themes, assigning proper definitions and terms, and finally reporting the results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Combining both, the analysis of this study's interview results has gone through the following steps: identification of the main research question, building a general coding framework, getting familiar with the data, segmentation, code-generation, theme-generation, theme-refinement, reporting, and finally interpreting the results.

Given that the interview questions were generally structured around exploring the perceived usefulness (PU) of each form of instruction (research interest), whether explicit (EI), implicit (II), or differentiated (DI), the following general categories have thus served as the starting point for coding.

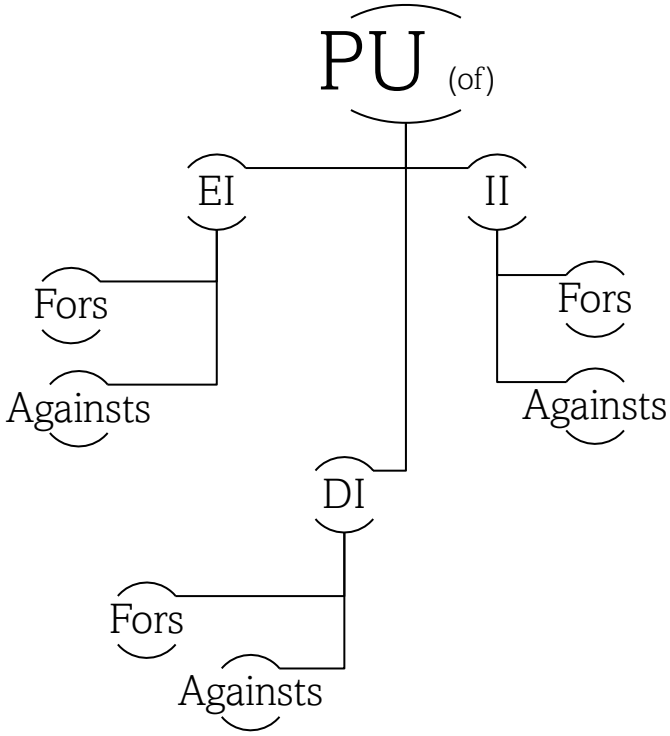


Figure 1. Perceived usefulness of explicit, implicit, and differentiated instruction

Once these general categories were set, a thematic bottom-up approach was used to generate relevant patterns of meaning from the text (interview results). This process started with data transcription and was then followed by a careful examination of its content several times over four weeks (to get familiar with the data). Using NVIVO, the segmentation then began to extract all useful information and categorize it under different general nodes (see Figure One). The next step was to re-examine these segments and assign them initial codes. These codes were used to generate different themes, which were revised, refined, and renamed multiple times to ensure they accurately reflect the intended meanings.

Another point to mention before presenting the results is how the anonymity and confidentiality of participants have been addressed in this report. Whenever a reference to one of the participants is made, a two-character code is used (instead of the participant's real name). The codes were assigned based on two aspects: the student's group (A for explicit instruction, B for implicit instruction, and C for differentiated instruction) and then a sequential number from 1 to 5, given that there were only five participants in each group. AS5, thus, refers to the fifth interviewee student from the explicit condition group, BS4 to the fourth interviewee student from the implicit condition group, and CS2 to the second interviewee student from the differentiated condition group.

Results and Discussion

To create a holistic and smooth narrative of the study findings, this section combines learners' responses (results) with their interpretation, all to explore Saudi EFL learners' voices and choices in explicit, implicit, and differentiated grammar pedagogies. To position these findings within a proper literature-based framework, references to previous research studies will be embedded within the narrative to maintain a clear, precise, and elaborate flow of ideas. Starting with the perceived usefulness of explicit and implicit instruction and ending with the differentiated version of both, the presentation of themes will also include supporting quotations and details.

Perceived Usefulness of Explicit Instruction

Despite being teachers' favorite and the most commonly used mode of teaching (see Abduh & Algouzi, 2020; AlGhanmi & Shukri, 2016), explicit instruction was perceived by students as the least preferable form of teaching. While some current study themes are similar to those already discussed in other perception-based research (e.g., poor retention), the lengthy three-phase interviews resulted in new interesting themes (e.g., cognitive load and form-condition interactions). In the following, these themes will be discussed, starting with the ones standing against the effectiveness of explicit instruction (poor retention, limited opportunities, passivity of learners, high cognitive load) as they were dominant, followed by the one that came as neutral (i.e., systematicity) and ending with the one standing with its effectiveness (i.e., useful form-condition interactions).

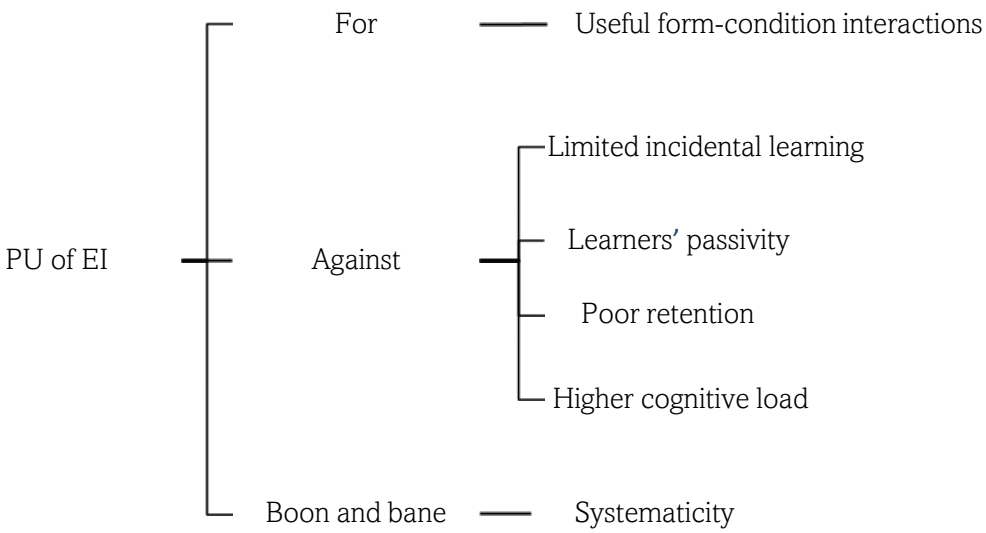


Figure 2 Perceived usefulness of explicit instruction

Poor Retention

When asked to recall and reflect on their past experiences with the subject matter, learners referred to explicit instruction as the formal and traditional way of grammar teaching. Some, however, also mentioned the occasional use of a more differentiated approach with varying levels of explicitness/implicitness. With that being said, a few students have pointed out that one of the drawbacks of explicit instruction is its short-term effect and how it does not stand the test of time. A student, for example, said: "We study the same (grammatical elements) every year, yet I still

find them difficult, maybe because they were not taught right?" (AS4). This retention issue is not new, as it was also raised by students in Sopin's (2015) study. Students in their research mentioned that although they were taught grammar explicitly in the past, they still do not feel competent enough to use it or feel comfortable around it.

Limited (incidental) Learning Opportunities

When asked about the drawbacks of explicit instruction during the sessions they attended, AS4 said, "The instruction was so limited. If it were not so direct, we would have had the chance to learn more stuff." This limitedness is contrastively linked to a point raised by learners (in the implicit condition) regarding their ability to go beyond simple grammatical knowledge and how they developed some competence in how to speak about specific topics using what they referred to as a "field-related word repertoire" (BS2).

Higher Cognitive Load

Another important point mentioned by the interviewee participants is that explicit instruction can sometimes get cognitively demanding as it 1) requires them to do a lot of rule memorization (AS4) and 2) focuses on abstract notions and concepts (e.g., definiteness and specificity when it comes to the English Article system) *(AS3).* Although this theme has not been addressed in the reviewed perception-based research, we believe it supports Ellis' (2009) and Green & Flower's (2003) argument that rule-application and rule-discovery explicit instruction place significant demands on students' cognitive resources.

Passivity of Learners

In line with the stereotypical image of explicit instruction as a "teacher-led" form of teaching, some students' responses emphasized the lack of engagement and absence of challenging activities, as indicated in the following quote.

> I do not usually give much attention to teachers who speak 100% of the class time and leave no space for me to be active or even just talk! I am taking a course with Ms. X this semester; she is excellent. She keeps me engaged and alert all the time (knowing that every now and then, she will challenge us with a question or an activity; some of these activities are based on movies we have watched, for example) (AS1).

Systematicity and Preciseness

The systematicity of explicit instruction was found to be a recurrent theme, one that was perceived as both a drawback and a merit. When mentioning the advantages of explicit instruction, a student, for example, described the direct explanation of rules as a rigid "1, 2, 3, 4" way of teaching (AS1). Another student from the same group, however, stated the opposite, as shown in the following quote:

> Explaining information directly and quickly and then providing me with some examples will do the job perfectly well. The sessions we attended were brief and concise. There was no extensive talking or mention of unimportant information; we were just given the gist, and that is what really matters (AS2).

According to her, focusing on metalinguistic explanation of rules ("the gist") constitutes the best teaching practice. A factor that may influence learners' perceptions of the matter is their motivation

to learn English. Being intrinsically motivated, for example, as found in Cornillie et al.'s (2012) study, is one of the few reasons why learners perceive explicit instruction as "useful".

Useful IC-FC Interaction

The only positive theme that has emerged from the interview results is the useful interaction between explicit instruction and complex rules. A student from the explicit condition alluded that this form of teaching (referring to explicit instruction) works best when there is a considerable amount of grammatical transformations, concepts, and comparisons, which supports other researchers' argument that complex rules are better taught explicitly (e.g., Hulstijn and De Graaff's, 1994). According to her (see the following quote), pointing out the differences between one form and another and "putting them in schedules for comparisons" is a good grammar teaching practice.

> Well, I have been taught by many teachers. The best one used the board to dictate grammatical rules, especially when there were a lot of changes, concepts, similarities, and differences. She would divide the elements into groups, put them in schedules, and then highlight the differences and similarities between one element and another (AS1).

Perceived Usefulness of Implicit Instruction

The discussion in this section will start with the themes standing with the effectiveness of implicit instruction (i.e., learners' autonomy, authenticity, involvement, and learning opportunities) as they were dominant, followed by their counterparts (i.e., increased anxiety and goal-ambiguity). As shown in Figures Two and Three, the results standing with the notion of implicit instruction outweigh the ones related to explicit instruction. This supports AlSakaker's (2025) overall finding that Saudi EFL learners perceive inductive means of grammar teaching more positively than explicit instruction.

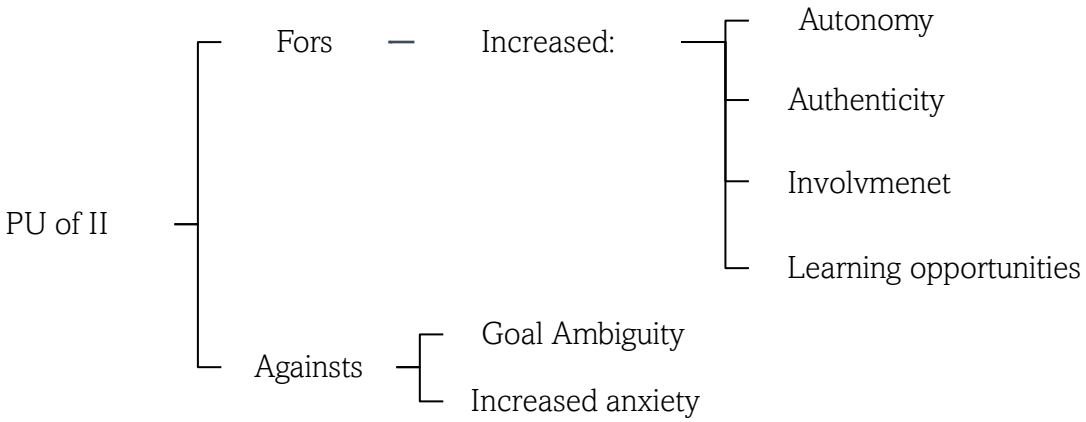


Figure 3 *Perceived usefulness of implicit instruction*

Learners' Autonomy

The increase in learners' autonomy is one theme that stands out in learners' responses. Students seem to take this autonomy very positively. They mentioned that it contributed to other important elements like motivation and engagement, as the following quotes suggest:

> We relied heavily on ourselves; the class was fun, as if we were playing games without realizing we were actually learning stuff. We also had so much freedom. There was no

> time to sleep or get bored because we were either thinking, writing, or speaking. That, in my opinion, is a good thing (BS1).
> When instruction is indirect, we learn, rely on ourselves, explore, search for new ideas, and be more motivated (BS2).

Authenticity and Unconventionality

Another theme that seems relevant is the breakout from conventional forms of instruction. The unconventionality of implicit instruction, as perceived by learners, promoted greater authenticity and made them less conscious of the setting (being in a formal language classroom). When talking about the advantages, for example, a student said: "I did not feel like I was forced to learn grammar; we barely noticed that we were actually learning anything. This way of teaching breaks the usual grammar learning ideals and makes it very much like real life" (BS3). The use of implicit instruction then, as understood from this quote, seems to answer the common teachers' call for instruction that assimilates real-life situations instead of the rigid superficial practices associated with explicit instruction (see Başöz, 2014)

Learners' Involvement

Due to the above two factors (class authenticity and learners' autonomy), students' involvement appears to have increased among participants in the implicit condition. Such increase is evident in learners' use of expressions like "we had no time to sleep or get bored" and "we were motivated" when describing implicit instruction. This was also notable in Cornillie et al.'s (2012) study, which linked students' perceptions of explicit and implicit instruction to their motivation and the reasons why they are learning English in the first place. Their results showed that while learners with intrinsic motivation perceived explicit instruction as "useful," those who favored implicit instruction used words like "engaging and immersive" to express their attitudes. A factor worth investigating in the future, then, is the extent to which learners' motivation (intrinsic or extrinsic) plays a role in the way they perceive explicit/implicit instruction.

More Learning Opportunities (Intended and Incidental Learning)

According to students involved in the implicit condition, they not only learned grammar but also acquired other elements, such as "field-related" vocabulary. One of them, for example, stated: "My language repertoire developed a lot during the sessions. I gained more vocabulary, and now I feel more confident talking about certain topics" (BS2). This suggests that learners in this condition have developed some self-perceived confidence, the feeling that they have enough resources to perform a task (Macintyre et al., 1998).

Increased Anxiety

The free-production tasks used in the implicit condition seem to have increased students' anxiety. A student, for example, said: "Sometimes I was overly hesitant over what and how to write or speak. That fear of making mistakes or missing your point was a bit disturbing" (BS1). This feeling has also been aptly described by another student from Sopin's (2015) study, who noted that "If you do not know grammar, you cannot organize your sentences, and you may, therefore, speak incorrectly" (p. 69). Being exposed to some level of explicit instruction, as another student from Tavakoli and Zarrinabadi's (2018) study described, will reduce this anxiety about making mistakes.

Goal Ambiguity (or Un-systematicity)

This theme has been one of significant recurrence in students' responses when discussing the points they considered as drawbacks of implicit instruction. A student, for instance, said, "I liked this form of teaching. But when it comes to quizzes, exams, and formal assessments, I need to know exactly what I should learn" (BS2). The fact that these responses followed an elaborate description of the current study's aim and a clear statement of the target points (being grammar-related) suggests that their description of the un-systematicity and goal-ambiguity of lessons might have been a reaction to their recent realization of what they viewed as an unalignment between instruction and intended outcomes. Some learners have also reported feeling lost during the sessions, especially when they could not figure out precisely what they were learning *(BS4)*. Other students suggested that some level of explicitness is required, as complete implicit instruction and "not exaclty knowing what is going on" were confusing *(CS3)*.

Perceived Usefulness of Differentiated Instruction

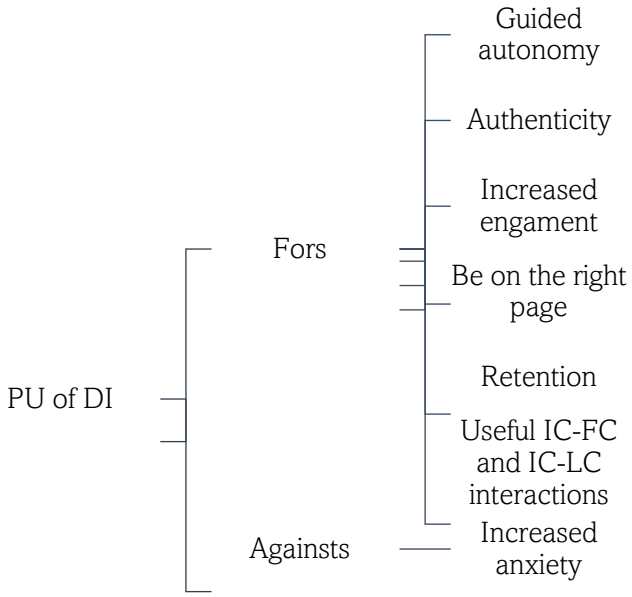


Figure 4. Perceived usefulness of differentiated instruction

A logical assumption that can be made when mixing explicit and implicit instruction is that learners' perceptions of DI would generate themes similar to those presented earlier. The interview results confirmed this assumption, with slight differences in how each theme was tackled. A point worth mentioning at this stage is that these results support Tomlinson's (2017) argument that using different methods within the same class is the best teaching practice in mixed-preference and ability classrooms. When asked which form of teaching they would like to receive in the future, all the interviewee students (15 in total) voted for the differentiated condition, which is a sign of their diversity. This diversity has been represented differently in other research studies. Sopin (2015), for example, has noticed that learners' preferences on the matter varied widely, with some at opposite extremes of the continuum and others falling in between.

Authenticity

The authenticity reported by students in the DI group varied in degree from earlier findings (in the Perceived Usefulness of Implicit Instruction section). Learners in the implicit group mainly

noted that they were less aware of the formal language classroom setting, perceiving the lessons as naturally immersive. In contrast, the DI group acknowledged the formal classroom environment but emphasized the importance of incorporating real-life tasks to enhance authenticity by connecting formal instruction to everyday life (AS2). One student remarked, "I believe combining both approaches will help me integrate the knowledge explicitly gained and apply grammar in my daily life" (BS3).

"Guide Me And Then Set Me Free" (Guided Autonomy)

Another interesting theme that was remarkably recurrent is learners' conceptualization of DI as a kind of instruction that would facilitate their autonomy. When asked about what form of instruction they would like to join in the future, for example, many of learners' responses came as follows:

> I would like to join the third (DI). Why? Because I appreciate it when teachers explain things directly and then allow me to participate, speak, learn, express myself, and handle what I have learned in my own way (AS1).
>
> Providing us with the gist (or setting us on the right path) and then allowing us to explore and branch out to different places is good (as if we were exchanging roles) (CS3).

Most of these responses suggest that learners perceived explicit instruction as "guidance" to set them in the right direction. This guidance, according to them, is the first step toward finding their own paths and reaching a level where they can rely on themselves. These findings support Tavakoli and Zarrinabadi's (2018) results, in which students indicated that explicit instruction increases their willingness to communicate, for it provides them with sufficient resources to perform communicative tasks.

Learners' Involvement

The increase in learners' involvement is another theme related to students' lived experiences in the DI condition. Under this general theme, three levels of involvement can be identified: affective, communicative, and cognitive. At the level of affective involvement, students noted an increase in their motivation. This has been indicated through students' use of simple emotional terms like "excited" in the following quote: "The more diverse the methods used, the more active and excited we get" (CS3), and "no time to bored" in "every lesson differentiated will be new and different with no time to get bored" (BS3).

Contrary to the theme of learners' passivity in explicit instruction and similar to that of learners' involvement in implicit instruction, a student from the differentiated condition mentioned that part of her being active was the result of being engaged in two-way communication and exchanging utterances with others. She said: "I liked that we were allowed to be active and communicate (to give and take, not just take)" (CS5).

Students have also reported being cognitively involved when linking explicit knowledge of rules (acquired through exposure to explicit instruction) to its procedural equivalent (acquired through exposure to implicit instruction). A student, for example, stated that "when I was applying the rules, my brain was working very well; as I was paying some effort (linking the knowledge of rules to how these rules are used in real-life tasks) *(CS2).* On another cognitive level, another student used the adjective "attentive" to describe their state of mind throughout the differentiated sessions *(CS5).*

"Being on the Right Page"

When justifying why they wanted to join the DI condition in the future, many learners mentioned that they found explicit instruction too rigid and systematic (and traditional), while implicit instruction sometimes felt unstructured. They preferred a balanced approach operating at the edge of systematicity, where they could explore and step out of context while still being guided and set on the right path, as indicated in the following quotes.

> I feel like we need at least ten minutes of explicit instruction to be on the right page (BS5).
>
> I prefer differentiated instruction. Explicit instruction is something I am already used to. I do not think I prefer implicit instruction as well, as I generally like to be aware of what I am learning, the plan, and the process. (CS1)

Useful IC-FC and IC-LC Interactions

Under this theme comes the interactions between instructional conditions (DI in this case) and 1) form complexity (IC-FC interactions) on the one hand and 2) learners' characteristics (IC-LC interactions) on the other. As to the first, students indicated that while some linguistic forms can be acquired naturally, others require certain levels of explicit instruction. One of the students, for example, justified her preference for DI by saying: "Not all elements are naturally learnable. Sometimes, we need the teacher to say the rule explicitly" *(BS2)* and vice versa.

When it comes to the interaction between learners' characteristics and the instructional condition, there was far more data than the ones before. A possible reason might be that students' understanding of themselves and their characteristics is better than their knowledge of linguistic forms. Some indications of this IC-FC interaction involve simple acknowledgments of the match between oneself and differentiated instruction. A student from the explicit condition, for example, has mentioned that she would like to join Group C (DI) in the future, saying, "It is the most effective way of teaching for me as AS1." The fact that she pointed out to herself in "for me" and then mentioned her own name indicates that she is aware of her individuality and possible differences from others.

When justifying her preference for differentiated instruction, a student from the implicit condition stated that "every learning situation is different. Some people are skilled at inducing the required item without needing anyone else. I, on the other hand, like to be given the information directly, and then I will find a way to handle it myself" (BS1). Another student pointed out that purely explicit instruction might benefit some students but not others and the same applies to implicit instruction. The differentiated condition, according to her, will 1) help everybody access the lesson and (in some cases) 1) grant everybody two chances to learn.

> It differs from one person to another. If it were 100% direct, some students would not go beyond the lesson; they would only learn what the teachers say without bothering to look up more information. (BS2).
>
> It grants everyone two chances to learn (CS4).

Given that "learners' characteristics" in this section refers to all sorts of individual differences and does not exclude learners' preferences or any other aspects in particular, it could also then be said that there were some references where learners mentioned that differentiated instruction is their preferred form of teaching as in the following two quotes:

> I would like to join the third type (differentiated condition) because it combines both, and I love diversity (CS2).

> I liked the diversity in the method used. It was not as boring as when only the teacher talks. We can collaboratively explore new ideas by watching videos or sharing our perspectives on various topics. (CS3)

Promotes Retention

The interview results also revealed that differentiated instruction promotes retention. That was, for example, pointed out while a student from the explicit condition was discussing the drawbacks of explicit instruction. She said: "… the information given was all abstract. I prefer it when the teacher considers me a child and uses lots of videos, stories, and examples. These make the instruction long-lasting". When asked about what she meant by "to be considered a child", she then elaborated:

> (You see) You (teachers) should be dealing with the human mind as if it were a baby. Everything should be explained in detail using stories, photos, and videos so the baby can understand. I understood all grammatical rules during the sessions, but I forgot everything I had learned when I wanted to do the activities and exercises; do you see my point? (AS3)

Another student from the differentiated condition also discussed this theme (which means the reference here is contextual, not just an assumption). When asked about the positive sides of enrolling in these DI sessions, she said: "During the sessions, I used to listen to your explanation of the rules, be active all the time, and then that is it … it sticks to my mind immediately" (CS1). In another context, she said: "I did not need to go back to the lessons and revise at all" (CS1).

Increased Anxiety

An intriguing point that was also mentioned by students attending the differentiated condition is that their anxiety levels when doing the free-production tasks have increased because of the explicit instruction they received halfway through. They argue that this part made them conscious and aware of what they were expected to do, and that increased their fear of not doing it properly. The following conversation illustrates this point:

> CS3: Some of the activities used (like story narration and picture description) were difficult.
> Interviewer: You mean you preferred closed activities like fill-in-the-gap?
> CS3: Yes.
> Interviewer: Is there a specific reason for this preference?
> CS3: Yes. We are often afraid of making mistakes or not fulfilling the task requirements when participating in those activities.

How Can this View Inform the Field of SLA?

Despite the numerous criticisms of students' perception area of research and the frequent questioning of its reliability and validity, the current results suggest something different. The fact that learners managed to identify what works best for them demonstrates their awareness of their individuality, as discussed earlier. This awareness is also evident in their ability to differentiate between various teaching methods, including the advantages and disadvantages of each, what each one promotes (e.g., authenticity, systematicity, retention, communication), and what keeps them motivated and engaged. Once validated in the future, these results, just like in other contexts, can be used in 1) crafting new directions for teachers' professional development and improving the

quality of teaching (Ferguson 2012), 2) providing evidence for important decisions (such as annual evaluations and promotions) 3) making input for institutional accountability (Kember et al., 2002).

One limitation of this paper is that the qualitative interview results were not triangulated with positivist performance-based data from the same participant group. Integrating both is believed to 1) help provide a more comprehensive view of how effective explicit, implicit, and differentiated instruction is and 2) contribute to the reliability of student perception area of research. Finding a direct alignment between what learners think and what their scores indicate, for example, might suggest that learners can identify what works best for them academically, making the above implications more solidly grounded. Such results (if no alignment was found) might also inform learners and instruction recipients of the gap between what they believe is the best and what their performance indicates.

Conclusion

In a world fixated on numbers and metrics, we often evaluate the quality of teaching based on exam scores rather than the unique, unfolding experiences of learners. The current study aimed to understand the way Saudi EFL learners perceive three different modes of grammar instruction: explicit, implicit, and differentiated. They were exposed to these forms for three weeks and then went through comprehensive interviews using a three-stage interview model. The results reveal that differentiated instruction was perceived as the most effective and preferred form of teaching. Despite implicit and explicit instruction (subsequently) being also perceived as effective, 15 out of 15 students selected the DI condition as the one they wish to join in the future. According to them, it promotes learners' autonomy, content authenticity, and positive IC-FC and IC-LC interactions. It also results in increased levels of engagement, retention, and security. Based on these findings, it could be argued that foundation-year learners are well aware of what works best for them, which enhances the validity of their perceptions and evaluations of different teaching approaches.

These findings have several important implications for future practices. At the level of teaching, EFL teachers in the context of this study are recommended to consider the notion of differentiated instruction instead of one-size-fits-all teaching practices. They are also advised to give learners a voice in the teaching-learning process. As Seldin (1993) puts it: "the opinions of those who eat the dinner should be considered if we want to know how it tastes" (p. 40). Policymakers are also advised not to impose a single teaching method and designate it as an exemplar of how teaching should occur, unless the decision is well-informed. Instead, DI should be fostered in teachers' training programs. Lastly, involving learners in the teaching evaluation process might also be another useful implication.

Funding: This research is not funded.
Acknowledgments: Not applicable.
Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Authenticity: This manuscript is an original work
Artificial Intelligence Statement: AI and AI-assisted technologies were not used.

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