

EFL Learners' Beliefs about Grammar Learning

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Diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i

pedagogije

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EFL Learners' Beliefs about Grammar Learning

Diplomski rad

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Summary

The paper is an attempt to investigate high school students' beliefs about English language grammar. The first part of the paper is a theoretical overview of learners' beliefs and attitudes and its importance for second language acquisition. It also explores previous research done in the area of learners' beliefs about grammar. The second part is a presentation of research whose aim was to investigate learners' beliefs about grammar, the connection between their beliefs and perception of teaching methods and the relationship between their beliefs and perceived level of success. The research was conducted on 200 high school students in three high schools in Osijek. The results show that most learners hold negative beliefs about English language grammar and that most learners find it boring. Most learners also experience difficulties when learning grammar. Despite this, learners recognize the need to learn grammar. One of important elements that influence learners' beliefs is their success and the results show that learners who perceive themselves as successful show greater preference to learn grammar than the learners who believe to be less successful in grammar. When it comes to the relationship between learners' beliefs and perception of teaching methods, results show that most learners prefer explicit grammar teaching.

Key words

learners' beliefs, grammar, second language acquisition, success, grammar teaching methods

Sažetak

Rad se bavi ispitivanjem stavova učenika srednje škole o učenju gramatike engleskog jezika. Prvi dio rada sadrži osnovni teorijski pregled važnosti stavova i vjerovanja učenika te njegovu povezanost s uspjehom u usvajanju stranog jezika te pregled dosadašnjih istraživanja iz područja vjerovanja učenika o gramatici engleskog jezika. Drugi dio rada jest prikaz provedenog istraživanja čiji je cilj bio istražiti stavove učenika o gramatici engleskog jezika, povezanost njihovih stavova s doživljavanjem nastavnih metoda te percepcijom uspjeha u gramatici. Istraživanje je provedeno na uzorku od 200 učenika tri srednje škole u Osijeku. Rezultati su pokazali da većina učenika ima negativan stav prema učenju gramatike engleskog jezika pri čemu ju većina ispitanika doživljava dosadnom. Velik broj učenika se prilikom učenja gramatike suočava s poteškoćama. Unatoč tomu, učenici prepoznaju važnost učenja gramatike. Jedan od važnih čimbenika koji utječu na stav učenika prema gramatici jest uspjeh te je istraživanje pokazalo da učenici koji se doživljavaju uspješnijima pokazuju veću sklonost učenju gramatike od učenika koji svoj uspjeh procjenjuju kao slabiji. Kada je riječ o povezanosti stavova o gramatici i doživljavanja nastavnih metoda, rezultati su pokazali kako većina učenika preferira eksplicitan način podučavanja.

Ključne riječi

stavovi i vjerovanja, gramatika, usvajanje stranog jezika, uspjeh, metode poučavanja

1. Introduction

The importance of learners' beliefs about language learning and its influence on language acquisition has been widely recognized and the subject of much research. Of special importance are learners' beliefs about grammar since this language area has traditionally been perceived as the most challenging for the learners.

Grammar teaching and learning has been an issue of a significant controversy in the area of second language acquisition. Although there have been numerous attempts to investigate different aspects of grammar learning, they have rarely touched upon students' beliefs and their perception of grammar learning. Studies that do look at learners' beliefs usually focus on language learning in general and not on the role of grammar instruction in particular.

This paper is an attempt to look into Croatian high-school students' beliefs about grammar learning and teaching. It aims to investigate learners' beliefs about grammar, the relationship between their beliefs and perception of teaching methods and perceived level of success. The first, theoretical, part of the paper will provide an overview of learners' beliefs and its importance for language acquisition and the most significant research done to date in the area of grammar learning and teaching. The second part is the practical part of the study with an overview of the methodology and results of research conducted in three high-schools in Osijek.

2. Learners' beliefs about SLA - definitions

Beliefs have been described as a messy construct due to their complex nature (Ferreira Barcelos, 2003). Richardson (1996, as cited in Brown, 2009: 47) defines attitudes, beliefs and perceptions as a “set of mental constructs and psychologically held understandings that drive person’s actions”. Defining beliefs about SLA is an equally difficult task and their complexity is reflected in the fact that different authors offer different terminology and definitions.

Kuntz, for example, (1997, as cited in Asbjornson, 1999) defines beliefs about SLA as acquired notions about language learning. Gaies (1998, as cited in Asbjornson, 1999) proposes a more detailed look into beliefs, emphasizing three characteristics of beliefs about language and language learning: beliefs are subjective understandings, they are relatively stable and they are idiosyncratic. They are formed and maintained by a complex social and cultural system. Finally, beliefs are unique to individuals and related to students’ backgrounds, motivations and overall context (Gaies, 1998, as cited in Asbjornson, 1999). An overview of some additional terms and definitions is provided in figure 1.

| Terms | Definitions |
|--|--|
| Folk linguistic theories of learning (Miller and Ginsberg, 1995) | “Ideas that learners have about language and language learning.” (p. 294) |
| Learner representations (Holec, 1987) | “Learners’ entering assumptions about their roles and functions of teachers and teaching materials.” (p.152) |
| Representations (Riley, 1994) | “Popular ideas about the nature of language and languages, language structure and use, the relationship between thought and language, identity and language, language and intelligence, language and learning etc.” (1994 p.8) |
| Metacognitive knowledge Wenden, 1986) | “The stable, storable although sometimes incorrect knowledge that learners have acquired about language, learning and the language learning process” (p. 163) |
| Cultural beliefs (Gardner, 1988) | Expectations in the mind of teachers, parents and students concerning the entire second language acquisition task.” (p. 110) |

Figure 1: Some of the different terms and definitions for beliefs about SLA (Source: Ferreira Barcelos, 2003: 9)

Ferreira Barcelos (2003) noticed that all of the definitions reflect the actual nature of language and language learning. Moreover, some of them emphasize the social and cultural nature of beliefs (Barcelos, 1995, Cortazii, 1996, as cited in Ferreira Barcelos, 2003). In other words, beliefs do not only have a cognitive dimension, but a social one as well, mostly because they are formed through complex social interactions.

2.1. Historical overview

The interest in learners' belief systems dates back to Horwitz (1981, as cited in Brown, 2009), who was the first to develop a questionnaire, entitled the "Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory" (BALLI). This questionnaire was designed to "assess teacher opinions on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning" (Horwitz, 1985, as cited in Ferreira Barcelos, 2003: 12). BALLI contains 34 items in five categories: nature of language learning, difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations. The questionnaire investigates learners' beliefs in general, however, there are several items related specifically to grammar instruction. The development of this instrument gave rise to so-called "BALLI studies" which were the first to explore second language learners' beliefs about the role of grammar in language learning and teaching (Brown, 2009). Researchers who have used BALLI in their studies (for example, Horwitz (1988, as cited in Brown, 2009) and Kern (1995, as cited in Brown, 2009) emphasized the need for further research in this area.

2.2. Current approaches to investigating beliefs about SLA

Ferreira Barcelos (2003) recognizes three main approaches to investigation of beliefs about SLA: normative, metacognitive and contextual. These will be discussed in more detail in the following sections of the paper.

2.2.1. Normative approach

According to Ferreira Barcelos (2003), this approach views beliefs about SLA as indicators of learners' future behaviors and they have mostly described and classified the types of beliefs about SLA. The studies within this approach define beliefs as synonyms for perceived notions, myths or misconceptions (Horwitz, 1988, as cited in Ferreira Barcelos, 2003). One of the most important characteristics of such a view is that learners' opinions are thought to be much different from the opinions of SLA researchers and scholars. Although this approach recognizes that learners have opinions and ideas about language learning, they are thought to be wrong or false. Most studies in this approach used Likert-type questionnaires and the most widely used questionnaire is the BALLI.

2.2.2. Metacognitive approach

Studies within this approach view beliefs as metacognitive knowledge and such an approach was most strongly advocated by Wenden (Ferreira Barcelos, 2003). According to Wenden (1999), learners' metacognitive knowledge constitutes their own theories that help them to reflect on what they are doing and develop potential for learning. In other words, of special relevance here is the relationship between metacognitive knowledge and beliefs and self-regulation in language learning. Although metacognitive knowledge has been recognized as an important factor in language learning, research on metacognitive knowledge and beliefs in language learning has been relatively scant (Wenden, 1999).

Data collection in this approach is mostly based on acquiring verbal accounts generated through semi-structured interviews, self-reports and custom questionnaires (Ferreira Barcelos, 2003).

2.2.3. Contextual approach

These studies pay special attention to defining beliefs according to various theoretical frameworks by collecting different types of data and performing diverse data analysis (Ferreira Barcelos, 2003). Their aim is not to generalize about beliefs about SLA but to get a better

understanding of beliefs in different contexts. Some of most commonly used methods include ethnographic classroom observations, diaries and narratives and discourse analysis.

According to this approach, beliefs are contextual, dynamic and social (Ferreira Barcelos, 2003). The central notion of this approach is the context which is seen as a dynamic concept, recipient for social interaction where participants' perspectives take center stage. In other words, this approach sees beliefs as a part of student's experiences and highly interrelated with their environment. (Ferreira Barcelos, 2003).

A summary of the three approaches is provided in figure 2.

| Approach | Normative | Metacognitive | Contextual |
|---|--|---|---|
| Definition of beliefs about SLA | Beliefs are preconceived notions, misconceptions and opinions | Beliefs are metacognitive knowledge – stable knowledge about language learning | Beliefs are part of the culture of learning and representations of language learning in a given context |
| Relationship between beliefs and actions | Beliefs are good indicators of future students' behaviors, autonomy and effectiveness in language learning | Beliefs are good indicators of learners' autonomy and effectiveness in language learning although there are other important factors | Beliefs are context-specific and should be investigated within the context of their actions |

Figure 2: Overview of the different approaches to beliefs about SLA (Source: Ferreira Barcelos, 2003: 26)

2.3. The origins and shaping factors of learners' beliefs about SLA

The complex nature of beliefs about SLA to a certain extent comes from a variety of different factors influencing and shaping them. According to Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005), there have so

far been several attempts in the literature to investigate the origins and shaping factors of learners' beliefs which led to several explanations. Speaking in general, the origins of learning beliefs are thought to be acquired both consciously and unconsciously at various stages of one's life (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, as cited in Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005). Some researchers (Chin and Brewer, 1993; Paris and Byrnes, 1989, as cited in Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005) claim that they develop early in elementary and secondary school while others (Cantwell, 1998; Schommer, 1993, as cited in Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005) mention the period of mid-to-late adolescence and even college (Weinstein, 1989, as cited in Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005).

Some of the shaping factors listed by various researchers are: family and home background, cultural background, classroom peers, and individual differences (Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005). Richardson (1996, as cited in Brown, 2009) and Pajares (1992, as cited in Brown, 2009) mention another important element: learners' previous educational experiences. They claim that learners' beliefs about teaching are formed through many years of their formal schooling and that they may be difficult to alter. Rifkin (2000, as cited in Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005) also mentions the level of language instruction, the nature of language studied, and the type of educational institution as factors also playing a role in shaping learner's beliefs.

2.4. The relationship between learners' beliefs and language teaching and learning

Despite their different points of view, almost all of the researcher and approaches to learners' beliefs about SLA have one thing in common: they all emphasize the importance of learners' beliefs for language teaching and learning. Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005), for example, argue that the learners' perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and metacognitive knowledge all play an important role in the learning process and highly affect its outcomes. In other words, such preconceived attitudes and beliefs may have profound influence on learning behaviors and success (Kuntz, 1996, as cited in Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005).

According to Ferreira Barcelos (2003), teachers' and students' beliefs about L2 acquisition are not only experiential but also dynamic, socially constructed, paradoxical, changeable, and contextually situated. It is, therefore, important for the improvement of teaching and learning to have a firm understanding of students' beliefs and perceptions. This close relationship between

beliefs and actions among both teachers and students was closely examined by Williams and Burden (1997, as cited in Brown, 2009) who claimed that teachers' and learners' actions are highly influenced by their beliefs which influence their actions in the classroom.

Furthermore, Kern (1995, as cited in Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005) explains that positive beliefs help learners to overcome problems and sustain motivation, while negative or unrealistic beliefs can easily lead to decreased motivation, frustration and anxiety. Students can also have false, uninformed or negative beliefs that may lead to less effective strategies which can further enhance negative attitude toward learning (Victori and Lickhart, 1995, as cited in Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005).

Differences between student and teacher beliefs might also create tension in the classroom (Kern, 1995, as cited in Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005). Pazaver and Wang (2009) concluded that a gap between the beliefs of teachers and learners might be closed by creating a dialogue between the two parties and becoming aware of students' beliefs is just the first step to achieve this. Schulz (2001) explains that foreign language educators need to keep in mind learners' beliefs and perceptions when planning classroom activities because teaching activities need to be perceived in the learners' minds as conducive to learning. In other words, it is up to the teacher to examine their students' perceptions regarding foreign language learning in order to make certain that either students' perceptions or instructional practices are modified to avoid conflicts between the two (Schulz, 2001).

The importance of open communication between students and their teachers was also advocated by Horwitz and Kern (1995, as cited in Brown, 2009). Furthermore, Brown (2009) points out that the significant discrepancies between teacher and student beliefs in several relevant areas point to the need for foreign language teachers to seek out their students' perspectives actively and to engage them in brief classroom discussions about the rationale behind certain instructional strategies. This, however, does not mean that teachers should allow students to dictate their instructional methods. Horwitz (1999, as cited in Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005) explains that although teachers cannot tailor instruction to each belief of each student, the investigation of beliefs which inform different behaviors in the language classroom is useful in making teachers

aware of different learner types. In other words, being aware of students' needs may encourage teachers to improve their teaching in order to address the learning styles of their students better.

2.5. Learners' beliefs and grammar

Learners' beliefs are especially important in the area of grammar teaching and learning as one of the language areas traditionally perceived as the most challenging and difficult. According to Zhou (2009, as cited in Ismail, 2010), researchers have ignored students' views in the past due to a common belief that they are not able to identify or express their actual needs. Although students' perceptions and beliefs about learning have not been the subject of much research, especially beliefs about grammar, recent SLA trends recognize that learners' beliefs and perceptions might be more central to effective second language acquisition than previously thought: "The fairly recent call in the fields of foreign language pedagogy and second language acquisition for more communicative, democratic, student-centered, and meaningful student engagement in the second language classroom has sparked a renewed interest in teachers' and students' belief systems about second language acquisition and pedagogy" (Brown, 2009: 46). As a result, there is now a number of researchers who have focused on this question and these include Brown (2009), Richards et al. (2001, as cited in Ismail, 2010), Schulz (2001), Hawkey (2006) Pazaver and Wang (2009) and others.

The importance of conducting research focused on investigating learners' beliefs about grammar lies in the possibility of foreign language teachers and students having disparate notions of effective grammar teaching. Moreover, Ismail (2010) suggests that one of the most important factors for successful grammar teaching and learning is for the teachers to become aware of students' beliefs and attitudes towards grammar as well as their learning styles in order to be able to develop suitable strategies and materials that can meet their interests and needs. According to many researchers (Horwitz, 1990, Kern, 1995, and Schulz, 1996, Williams and Burden, 1997, as cited in Brown, 2009), mismatches between foreign language students' and teachers' beliefs and expectations can otherwise negatively affect the students' satisfaction with the language class and motivation and they also play an important role in their achievement (Williams and Burden, 1997, as cited in Brown, 2009). Schulz (1996: 349) also supports this claim by stating: "Students

whose instructional expectations are not met may consciously or subconsciously question the credibility of the teacher and/or the instructional approach. Such lack of pedagogical face validity could affect learners' motivation". Moreover, Mantle-Bromey (1995, as cited in Schulz, 2001) claim that some students may come to foreign language classroom with already formed beliefs and expectations that may prove harmful to their success in language learning.

3. Grammar teaching and learning – definition and approaches

Ellis (2006: 84) defines grammar teaching as “any instructional technique that draws learners’ attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it”. Although the notion of grammar teaching and its role has been a very controversial issue in the past, the importance of grammar teaching and learning has been emphasized by many researchers. Ismail (2010), for example, describes it as one of the key elements for the success or failure of formal communication.

Up to the 1970s, explicit grammar teaching and error correction took center stage in grammar teaching and teacher-directed explanations, and extensive drill and practice by students were considered crucial for the development of basic language competence (Manley and Calk, 1997). However, such behaviorist model of language learning and teaching was starting to weaken in the early 1970s when language acquisition research started questioning the efficiency of focus on form. According to Schulz (1996), recent, so-called communicative approaches, went a step further and now clearly downplay the role of form-focused instruction in general and explicit error correction in particular. Such research still demonstrated the need for formal grammar instruction which has led to a resurgence of grammar teaching and its role in second language acquisition has become the focus of much current investigation. Nassaji and Fotos (2004) claim that despite such empirical support for grammar instruction there is still much controversy over what kind of grammar instruction would be most beneficial for learners and their needs. Such controversy can be attributed to the complex relationship between teaching and learning, and the fact that how something is taught is not directly related to how it is learned.

Bill VanPatten (as cited in Manley and Calk, 1997) argues that the question whether grammar study has a role in second language acquisition should not be questioned at all. Instead, researchers should focus on determining the best grammar teaching approach, the one that would be most beneficial for learners. The starting point according to VanPatten should be the investigation of the beliefs of those most affected by this issue: learners. However, in order to choose the best teaching strategy it is important for teachers to understand what causes grammar learning difficulties for learners and how to address these issues.

3.1. What causes grammar learning difficulties?

According to Ellis (2006), the real source of controversy in grammar teaching is the choice of which grammatical structures to teach. The selection of those structures should be based on their inherent learning difficulty. He distinguishes between two different senses of learning difficulty: (a) the difficulty learners have in understanding a grammatical feature and (b) the difficulty they have in internalizing a grammatical feature so that they are able to use it accurately in communication. As an example, Ellis explains that most learners have no difficulty in grasping the rule for English third person–s but they have enormous difficulty in internalizing this structure so they can use it accurately.

The problem of grammar learning difficulty was also thoroughly discussed by DeKeyser (2005) who mentions three basic factors involved in determining grammatical difficulty: complexity of form, complexity of meaning and complexity of form-meaning relationship. The author explains that the meaning can be a source of difficulty for the learners because of novelty, abstractness, or a combination of both. Furthermore, DeKeyser explains that articles, classifiers, grammatical gender, and verbal aspect are notoriously hard to acquire for second language learners who do not have such concepts in their first language. What all these elements of grammar have in common is that they express “highly abstract notions that are extremely hard to infer, implicitly or explicitly, from the input” (DeKeyser, 2005: 5).

According to DeKeyser (2005), this nature and degree of grammar learning difficulty has a range of implications for grammar teaching. In other words, different activities are likely to have a differential impact on different structures characterized by different learning problems. In order to understand the true scope of grammar learning difficulties and its influence on teaching, DeKeyser proposes further investigation and research into this issue.

When it comes to the question how teachers should teach grammar and what the most suitable grammar teaching strategies would be, two approaches are most broadly discussed among researchers: explicit and implicit grammar teaching.

3.2. Explicit grammar teaching

Ellis (2006) describes explicit knowledge as a set of facts that speakers of a language have learned. These facts concern different aspects of language including grammar. According to Ellis (2006: 95), explicit knowledge is “held consciously, is learnable and verbalisable, and is typically accessed through controlled processing when learners experience some kind of linguistic difficulty in using the L2”.

Several researchers tried to investigate learners’ beliefs about explicit grammar teaching and its influence in foreign language acquisition. Schulz (2001) conducted a research about students’ and teachers’ perceptions regarding the role of explicit grammar and corrective feedback in foreign language learning. The results of the study indicate that students strongly believed that explicit grammar instruction could play a positive role in foreign language learning. Moreover, they reported that they preferred to be taught in that way as the formal study of grammar helped them keep the rules of grammar in mind in their written and oral communication.

Ismail (2010) came to a similar conclusion with his study of learners’ views of ESL grammar learning. Results of his study show that many students believe that learning explicit grammatical rules is essential for understanding the conventions of sentences and utterances.

Other researchers such as Harley, Swain and Lapkin (1984, as cited in Nassaji and Fotos, 2004) also claimed that some type of focus on grammatical forms was necessary for learners to develop high levels of target language accuracy. Furthermore, Nassaji and Fotos (2004) argued that explicit instruction results in substantial gains in the learning of target structures in comparison to implicit instruction.

3.3. Implicit grammar teaching

According to Ellis (2006), unlike explicit knowledge, implicit knowledge is held unconsciously; it is accessed quickly and easily and can be verbalized only if it is made explicit.

Literature offers some arguments advocating an implicit-based approach to grammar teaching. Nassaji and Fotos (2004), for example, point to a more cautious approach by researchers who do

not question the need for explicit instruction but rather object to traditional grammar teaching approaches where grammatical structures are explicitly presented in a de-contextualized manner. Moreover, Krashen (1999) claims the effects of explicit grammar instruction to be minor and weak. He further argues that explicit knowledge about grammatical structures and rules for their use does not necessarily turn into implicit knowledge and does not guarantee success in grammar acquisition. Truscott (1996, as cited in Nassaji and Fotos, 2004) also rejects the value of explicit grammar instruction on similar grounds claiming that grammar instruction alone may not promote genuine knowledge of language.

Ellis (2002, as cited in Nassaji and Fotos, 2004: 130) does not deny the role for explicit instruction, but he does suggest that language learning is ultimately implicit in nature. According to him, achieving linguistic competence takes “tens of thousands of hours of practice, practice that cannot be substituted for by provision of a few declarative rules”.

It is important to mention that most of these researchers do not undermine the importance of grammar instruction. They rather suggest that, besides being presented with already formed rules, learners must also have opportunities to “encounter, process, and use instructed forms in their various form-meaning relationships” (Nassaji, Fotos, 2004: 130).

3.4. The best approach to teaching grammar

According to Ellis (2006), second language grammar acquisition is a complex process that can be assisted best by a variety of approaches. It is, therefore, important to recognize what options are available and critically assess them and their potential benefits and downsides. Ellis (2006: 103) calls this “the starting point for developing a personal theory of grammar teaching”.

He further claims that the solution to the best grammar teaching approach may lie in the provision of enough communicative opportunities containing instructed grammar forms. In other words, a combination of form focused instruction and meaningful communication is necessary.

Nassaji and Fotos (2004: 130) point to the results of current research which indicate that learners need “opportunities to both encounter and produce structures which have been introduced either explicitly, through a grammar lesson, or implicitly, through frequent exposure”. According to

them, if the goal of second language learning is the development of communicative competence, grammar and communication must be integrated. The challenge of identifying the best approaches of achieving this goal in second language classrooms is still a debatable issue. However, Nassaji and Fotos (2004) do offer three essential conditions for acquisition of grammatical forms: learner noticing and continued awareness of target forms, repeated meaning-focused exposure to input containing such forms, and enough opportunities for output and practice.

3. The present study

Learners' belief system and their perceptions of effective learning and teaching is a "complex interplay of numerous factors, interpersonal and pedagogical, as well as social and psychological" (Brown, 2009: 55). Since the topic of learners' beliefs about grammar learning is an extremely broad one, the present study focuses only on investigating general learners' beliefs about grammar learning, bringing it into a relationship with some basic factors such as their perceived level of success and perception of teaching methods. Most of previous research has one common feature – almost all of it, to a certain extent, mentions learners' beliefs, their level of success and grammar teaching methods as important factors for grammar learning. It often aimed to answer the question of how grammar should be taught and to determine the most appropriate grammar teaching method that meets the needs of most learners in grammar learning. This study does not look into this issue since it is too broad and too complex of a topic and would require a thorough investigation into grammar teaching practices in Croatian high schools. However, it does offer a general overview of learners' perceptions of grammar teaching methods, more specifically their perception of implicit and explicit grammar teaching.

3.5. Methodology

3.5.1. Aim

The aim of this research was to investigate EFL learners' beliefs about grammar learning, the connection between their beliefs and perceived level of success in grammar as well as their beliefs and perception of grammar teaching methods.

The study set out to answer the following research questions:

1. What are EFL learners' beliefs about grammar learning?
 - 1.1. Do learners like grammar and how do they rank grammar in comparison with other language learning areas?

- 1.2. What is the learners' attitude towards grammar in terms of the interest it provokes, its comprehensibility, difficulty and necessity?
- 1.3. What is the learners' evaluation of the importance and necessity of grammar learning?
- 1.4. What are the learners' beliefs about grammar teaching methods?
- 1.5. Do learners experience any difficulties in learning grammar and what causes these difficulties?
- 1.6. What do learners find as prerequisites for successful grammar learning?
2. What is the connection between learners' beliefs and their perceived level of success in grammar learning?
3. What is the relationship between learners' beliefs and their perception of grammar teaching methods?

3.5.2. Sample

The participants in the study were 200 high school students from three high schools in Osijek: Second Grammar School, Third Grammar School and School of Applied Arts and Design in Osijek. The students' age ranged from 14 to 19 (Table 1), the average age was 17. They study English language as their first foreign language. According to their responses, they had been learning English from 5 to 15 years, on average 9 years (Table 2). The sample consists of 46 male and 154 female learners (Table 3). The sample was chosen randomly, irrespective of learners' gender or English language grade.

Table 1: Respondents' age distribution

| Age | Frequency | Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------|-----------------------|
| 14 | 14 | 7.0 | 7.0 |
| 15 | 45 | 22.5 | 29.5 |
| 16 | 52 | 26.0 | 55.5 |
| 17 | 87 | 43.5 | 99.0 |
| 18 | 1 | 0.5 | 99.5 |
| 19 | 1 | 0.5 | 100.0 |
| Total | 200 | 100.0 | |

Table 2: Respondents' distribution according to English learning experience

| Years of learning English | Frequency | Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|------------------------------|-----------|---------|-----------------------|
| 5 | 1 | 0.5 | 0.5 |
| 6 | 5 | 2.5 | 3.0 |
| 7 | 13 | 6.5 | 9.5 |
| 8 | 73 | 36.5 | 46.0 |
| 9 | 51 | 25.5 | 71.5 |
| 10 | 25 | 12.5 | 84.0 |
| 11 | 20 | 10.0 | 94.0 |
| 12 | 11 | 5.5 | 99.5 |
| 15 | 1 | 0.5 | 100.0 |
| Total | 200 | 100.0 | |

Table 3: Respondents' gender distribution

| Gender | Frequency | Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------|-----------|---------|-----------------------|
| male | 46 | 23.0 | 23.0 |
| female | 154 | 77.0 | 100.0 |
| Total | 200 | 100.0 | |

3.5.3. Instrument

A special questionnaire was designed with several sets of items corresponding to three important factors of the research: general learner's beliefs, their perception of teaching methods and perceived level of success. The introductory part contains items about the general demographic data and previous language learning experience.

The first set of questionnaire items aims to investigate general learners' beliefs about grammar learning: it aims to compare grammar with other language learning areas and provide an overview of learners' attitude towards grammar learning. In other words, it investigates their perceptions about whether grammar learning is interesting or boring, about grammar learning comprehensibility, its difficulty and, finally, grammar learning necessity.

The second set of items refers to learners' evaluation of the role and necessity of grammar learning and its importance and implications for their future life.

Since it is very difficult to question learners' beliefs about grammar learning without any relation to grammar teaching methods, the third set of items refers to teaching methods. More specifically, it aims to investigate learners' perception of implicit and explicit grammar teaching since these issues are broadly discussed in the literature as well. This set also includes items aiming to investigate learners' perception about the prerequisites for successful grammar learning and potential difficulties learners experience in grammar learning as well as the cause of such difficulties.

Finally, the last, fourth set of items refers to learners' learners' perception about their level of success in grammar learning. These data were later used to analyze the relationship between their perception of success and other factors such as grammar teaching methods and their general beliefs about grammar learning.

The questionnaire items were a combination of Likert's scale and some additional open-ended questions for clarification. The internal reliability was satisfactory with $\alpha = 0.83$.

3.5.4. Procedure

A pilot study was conducted at the beginning of the research. Questionnaires were administered to 50 students at Second grammar school in Osijek. They were anonymous and the survey lasted for 15 minutes. The collected data indicated the need to adapt or alter some of the questionnaire items in order to make it valid and avoid any ambiguity.

The actual research was done later in three high schools in Osijek and involved 200 respondents. Questionnaires were administered to the learners at the beginning of their regular lessons at school and were anonymous. The survey lasted for 15 minutes.

Finally, a quantitative analysis of the collected data was done in SPSS Statistics program using descriptive statistics, correlations and t-tests.

4. Results

The first research question set out to investigate learners' beliefs about grammar learning. The first supporting question aimed to determine whether learners like grammar and how they rank grammar in comparison with vocabulary, reading, writing, listening and speaking. Results indicate that more than half of the respondents hold negative beliefs and attitudes towards grammar. As shown in Table 4, 76% of the respondents either hold negative beliefs or are indifferent towards learning grammar: 52% do not like to learn grammar, while 24% have not got a clearly defined positive or negative opinion.

Table 4: Learners' preference for grammar

I like English language grammar.

| | Frequency | Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|----------------------|-----------|---------|-----------------------|
| I strongly disagree. | 57 | 28.5 | 28.5 |
| I disagree. | 47 | 23.5 | 52.0 |
| Neutral | 48 | 24.0 | 76.0 |
| I agree. | 35 | 17.5 | 93.5 |
| I strongly agree. | 13 | 6.5 | 100.0 |
| Total | 200 | 100.0 | |

Learners were asked to further explain their answer in an open-ended response. Most of the learners who holds negative beliefs about learning grammar (strongly disagree or disagree) explain that grammar is boring, difficult and involves too much information. Some also dislike grammar because of their teacher's approach describing it as "inappropriate" and "wrong" (Table 5).

Table 5: Learners' comments about why they like/ do not like to learn grammar

| Statement | Frequency | Cumulative Percent |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------|
| - | 103 | 51.5 |
| Boring | 22 | 62.5 |
| Difficult | 14 | 69.5 |
| Unintelligible | 9 | 74.0 |
| Necessary | 9 | 78.5 |
| Logical | 7 | 82.0 |
| Easy | 5 | 84.5 |
| Requires learning by heart | 5 | 87.0 |
| Bad teaching approach | 4 | 89.0 |
| I prefer vocabulary | 3 | 90.5 |
| Depends on what is being taught | 3 | 92.0 |
| Too much information | 3 | 93.5 |
| Interesting | 3 | 95.0 |
| Tiring | 2 | 96.0 |
| I don't have the habit of learning it | 2 | 97.0 |
| Unnecessary | 2 | 98.0 |
| I learn it because of the grade | 2 | 99.0 |
| Pointless | 1 | 99.5 |
| Depends on the teacher | 1 | 100.0 |
| Total | 200 | |

Almost one third of the respondents who answered this question described grammar as “boring” or used a synonym to denote the same meaning. The second most commonly mentioned word was “difficult”. These results are in accordance with Loewen et al (2009) whose research also indicated that over half of the respondents in their research described grammar as “boring” and “difficult”.

When it comes to comparison of grammar and other language learning areas, results show that learners prefer all other language learning areas to grammar (Table 6). The mean scores of all other areas are much higher than the mean score for grammar. This means that learners’ beliefs about other areas are more positive. Moreover, table 6 shows that the mode value for grammar on a scale from 1 to 5 is 1 which indicates that this was the most preferred response. This confirms that most respondents expressed that they do not like grammar at all.

Table 6: Comparison of learners' preference for grammar and other language learning areas

| Variable | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Mode | Std. Deviation |
|--------------------|-----|---------|---------|------|------|----------------|
| Vocabulary | 198 | 1 | 5 | 3.73 | 5 | 1.227 |
| Grammar | 200 | 1 | 5 | 2.50 | 1 | 1.252 |
| Reading | 200 | 1 | 5 | 4.17 | 5 | 1.080 |
| Writing | 200 | 1 | 5 | 3.54 | 3 | 1.194 |
| Listening | 199 | 1 | 5 | 4.05 | 5 | 1.081 |
| Speaking | 200 | 1 | 5 | 3.95 | 5 | 1.172 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 197 | | | | | |

In order to determine whether the difference between preference of grammar and other language areas is statistically significant, a paired-samples t-test was conducted. The difference between learners' preference of different language areas is significant when the value under "Sig." is equal or less than 0.05. If there is no significant difference between learners' preference of the observed language areas, the value under "Sig." is greater than 0.05. Results in table 7 show that there is a statistically significant difference between grammar in comparison to other language areas ($p = .00$ for all pairs observed). This means that learners prefer all other language areas significantly more to grammar.

Table 7: Comparison of grammar to other language learning areas - paired samples t-test

| | | Paired Differences | | | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------|-----------------|---------|-----|-----------------|
| | | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | | | |
| Pair 1 | Vocabulary - Grammar | 1.242 | 1.314 | .093 | 13.300 | 197 | .000 |
| Pair 2 | Grammar – Reading | -1.670 | 1.371 | .097 | -17.222 | 199 | .000 |
| Pair 3 | Grammar – Writing | -1.035 | 1.380 | .098 | -10.610 | 199 | .000 |
| Pair 4 | Grammar – Listening | -1.543 | 1.490 | .106 | -14.609 | 198 | .000 |
| Pair 5 | Grammar - Speaking | -1.450 | 1.427 | .101 | -14.365 | 199 | .000 |

The second supporting question aimed to investigate learners' attitude towards grammar learning: their beliefs about grammar learning difficulty, necessity, comprehensibility and the level of interest it provokes. The results, presented in table 8, show that learners mostly hold neutral opinions about the categories observed. The only exception is grammar learning necessity where the mean value is notably higher than the mean values for other categories. In other words, they recognize the need and importance of grammar learning.

Table 8: Learners' attitude towards grammar learning

Grammar learning is:

| Variable | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Mode | Std. Deviation |
|-------------------------------|-----|---------|---------|------|------|----------------|
| boring - interesting | 196 | 1 | 5 | 2.60 | 3 | 1.184 |
| difficult – easy | 197 | 1 | 5 | 2.77 | 3 | 1.184 |
| unintelligible – intelligible | 195 | 1 | 5 | 3.32 | 3 | 1.206 |
| unnecessary – necessary | 196 | 1 | 5 | 4.13 | 5 | 1.087 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 193 | | | | | |

The mean and mode values for all categories concur apart from grammar learning necessity where the mode is greater than the mean (Table 8). This indicates that most learners expressed their full agreement with the statement that grammar learning is necessary.

In another, later questionnaire item aiming to investigate learners' opinion about the necessity of grammar learning, learners were asked to express their level of agreement with the statement that grammar learning is necessary. Results presented in table 10 show that most learners (72%), despite their negative beliefs about grammar learning, recognize the need to learn grammar.

Table 10: Learners' beliefs about the necessity of grammar learning

Grammar learning is necessary.

| | Frequency | Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------------------------|-----------|---------|--------------------|
| Valid strongly disagree | 5 | 2.5 | 2.5 |
| disagree | 12 | 6.0 | 8.5 |
| neutral | 38 | 19.0 | 27.5 |
| agree | 63 | 31.5 | 59.0 |
| strongly agree | 82 | 41.0 | 100.0 |
| Total | 200 | 100.0 | |

In order to investigate learners' opinion about the reasons of grammar learning necessity, learners were provided with a list of reasons to learn English where they expressed that they find grammar learning important mostly because of national state exams, future employment and successful communication (Table 11). Although the means are somewhat different, the mode value for all six items was 5 meaning that, in most cases, the respondents expressed full agreement with the statements. This means that learners recognize all of the mentioned reasons as valid reasons for the learning grammar. However, the mean values show that the most important reason for learning grammar is passing the state exams (Table 11).

Table 11: Learners' beliefs about the reasons for grammar learning:

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Mode | Std. Deviation |
|--|-----|---------|---------|------|------|----------------|
| Grammar helps my English language competence. | 200 | 1 | 5 | 3.99 | 5 | 0.962 |
| Learning grammar rules is a precondition for successful communication. | 200 | 1 | 5 | 3.85 | 5 | 1.111 |
| Learning grammar contributes to a successful communication. | 200 | 1 | 5 | 4.10 | 5 | 1.082 |
| Learning grammar helps to build up self-confidence. | 199 | 1 | 5 | 3.47 | 5 | 1.348 |
| Learning grammar is important because of future employment. | 200 | 1 | 5 | 4.09 | 5 | 1.045 |
| Learning grammar is important because of national state exams. | 200 | 1 | 5 | 4.56 | 5 | 0.761 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 199 | | | | | |

For the sake of a more thorough data analysis, the above mentioned reasons were further grouped into intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. Intrinsic reasons were: learning English in order to boost self-confidence and master English language. Extrinsic reasons were: learning English because of future employment and national state exams. In order to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in learners' responses between intrinsic and extrinsic groups of reasons to learn English, a paired samples t-test was conducted. Paired samples t-test results in table 12 indicates that there is a statistically significant difference ($p=.00$) in scores for intrinsic and extrinsic groups of reasons. In other words, learners recognize the need to learn grammar for extrinsic reasons significantly more than for intrinsic ones.

Table 12: Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic reasons for learning grammar - paired samples t-test

| | Paired Differences | | | | | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--|--------------------|----------------|-----------------|---|--------|-------|-----|-----------------|
| | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | | | |
| | | | | Lower | Upper | | | |
| Pair 1 Extrinsic reasons – Intrinsic reasons | ,59799 | ,90408 | ,06409 | ,47161 | ,72437 | 9,331 | 198 | ,000 |

The fourth supporting question aimed to investigate learners' beliefs in terms of their perception of grammar teaching methods and approaches, especially the issue of explicit and implicit grammar teaching. Results in table 13 shows that learners hold a neutral opinion about the amount of grammar-focused activities in the classroom. They also do not have a clearly positive or negative opinion about their personal participation in such activities. However, according to mean and mode scores, they did express high level of agreement with the statement that grammar learning is more efficient if grammar rules are taught explicitly. The mean score for this statement is notably higher than the mean scores of other responses and the mode is 5 indicating that most respondents fully agree with this statement.

Table 13: Learners' perception of grammar teaching approaches

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Mode | Std. Deviation |
|--|-----|---------|---------|------|------|----------------|
| I would like more grammar activities in the classroom. | 200 | 1 | 5 | 2.49 | 3 | 1.169 |
| I like to participate in grammar activities in the classroom. | 198 | 1 | 5 | 2.72 | 3 | 1.127 |
| Learning grammar is more efficient if teacher first presents grammar rules and then they move on to solving tasks. | 198 | 1 | 5 | 4.27 | 5 | ,942 |
| Learning grammar is more efficient if grammar rules are taught unconsciously, through context. | 198 | 1 | 5 | 3.27 | 3 | 1.304 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 198 | | | | | |

In order to investigate whether there is any significant difference in learners' level of agreement with explicit and implicit grammar teaching, a paired samples t-test was conducted. Results (table 14) show that there is a significant difference between learners' average scores for implicit and explicit teaching ($p = .00$). Learners value explicit grammar teaching considerably more than the implicit one.

Table 14: Learners' perception of explicit vs. implicit grammar teaching – paired samples t-test

| | Paired Differences | | | | | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--|--------------------|----------------|-----------------|---|-------|-------|-----|-----------------|
| | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | | | |
| | | | | Lower | Upper | | | |
| Pair 1 Explicit grammar teaching - Implicit grammar teaching | 1.000 | 1.596 | .113 | .776 | 1.224 | 8.815 | 197 | .000 |

One of the supporting questions aimed to investigate possible difficulties learners might face in the process of learning grammar. Table 15 shows the comparison between the number of learners who experience difficulties in grammar learning and the ones who do not. Although the number of learners who experience problems and those who do not is similar, the majority of learners do experience problems when learning grammar.

Table 15: Learners perceptions about grammar learning difficulties

Do you experience any difficulties in grammar learning?

| | Frequency | Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|--------------------|
| Valid No | 87 | 43.5 | 43.5 |
| Yes | 113 | 56.5 | 100.0 |
| Total | 200 | 100.0 | |

Most of the respondents who answered the question of experiencing difficulties positive were then asked to express the reasons behind such difficulties. Results show that most of the respondents believe that the reasons lie in the big amount of information and subject matter in class followed by the fact that it is different from the grammar in their native language (Table 16). As the third reason, respondents also admit that they have not developed the habit of continuous grammar study. Interestingly, most of the respondents do not blame the teachers for their grammar learning difficulties and they find the amount of grammar activities in class sufficient.

Table 16: The causes of learners' difficulties in grammar learning

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Mode | Std. Deviation |
|--|-----|---------|---------|------|------|----------------|
| Lots of information and subject matter | 112 | 1 | 5 | 3.64 | 3 | 1.154 |
| It is different from Croatian language grammar | 112 | 1 | 5 | 3.29 | 3 | 1.183 |
| Teacher does not explain grammar well. | 113 | 1 | 5 | 3.04 | 3 | 1.365 |
| There is not enough grammar activities in class. | 112 | 1 | 5 | 2.59 | 3 | 1.227 |
| I do not have the learning habit. | 112 | 1 | 5 | 3.27 | 3 | 1.369 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 112 | | | | | |

In order to investigate if experiencing difficulties in grammar learning is related to learners' negative beliefs, the two groups of learners and their preference of grammar was compared. Data presented in table 17 indicated that learners who experience grammar learning difficulties rated their preference to learn grammar slightly lower than the group of learners who do not experience such difficulties. In other words, learners who are having problems with learning grammar are also more prone to holding negative beliefs. On the other hand, learners who do not experience any difficulties showed a more positive attitude towards grammar.

Table 17: Relationship between learners' preference for grammar and the difficulties they experience

| | Do you experience any difficulties when learning grammar? | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|----------------------------------|--|-----|------|----------------|-----------------|
| I like English language grammar. | No | 87 | 3.25 | 1.203 | .129 |
| | Yes | 113 | 1.92 | .946 | .089 |

An independent samples test was conducted in order to investigate if there is any statistically significant difference between the two groups of learners in terms of their preference for grammar. Results (table 18) indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean values of learners' preference for grammar between the two groups of learners ($p = .00$). This means that learners who do not experience grammar learning difficulties prefer grammar significantly more than learners who do experience grammar learning difficulties.

Table 18: Difference between the learners who do not experience grammar learning difficulties and those who do in terms of their preference for grammar: independent samples test

| t-test for Equality of Means | | | |
|----------------------------------|-------|---------|-----------------|
| I like English language grammar. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
| | 8.504 | 159.642 | .000 |

Finally, learners beliefs were also investigated in terms of learners beliefs about the prerequisites of successful grammar learning. Table 19 shows that, according to learner responses, practical examples and opportunity to use the language in practice and suitable teaching methods are the most important preconditions for successful grammar teaching to take place. Interestingly, natural aptitude was rated the lowest.

Table 19: Learners beliefs about the prerequisites for successful grammar learning

Descriptive Statistics – What is necessary for successful grammar learning?

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Mode | Std. Deviation |
|-------------------------------|-----|---------|---------|------|------|----------------|
| Continuous study | 197 | 1 | 5 | 3.85 | 5 | 1.164 |
| Suitable teaching methods | 199 | 1 | 5 | 4.12 | 5 | .928 |
| Natural instinct / aptitude | 198 | 1 | 5 | 3.70 | 4 | 1.107 |
| As many examples from context | 198 | 1 | 5 | 4.19 | 5 | .890 |
| Attention in class | 199 | 1 | 5 | 4.02 | 5 | 1.059 |
| Good pre-knowledge | 197 | 1 | 5 | 3.80 | 5 | 1.119 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 195 | | | | | |

The second research question aimed to investigate the connection between learners perceived level of success in grammar and their beliefs about grammar learning. The results in Table 20 show that there is considerable positive correlation between learners' fondness for grammar and the level of interest grammar provokes in them. In other words, learners who like to learn grammar also are more likely to find it interesting, comprehensible and easy. However, there is no significant correlation between their perceived level of success and perception about grammar learning difficulty or the interest it provokes in them.

Table 20: Relationship between learners perceived level of success and their beliefs about grammar learning

| | | I like to learn English language grammar. | Grammar learning is boring – interesting | Grammar learning is difficult - easy | Grammar learning is unintelligible – intelligible | Grammar learning is unnecessary – necessary |
|--|---------------------|---|--|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Assess your level of English language grammar knowledge | Pearson Correlation | .394** | .058 | .211 | .289* | .102 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .006 | .699 | .154 | .049 | .488 |
| | N | 48 | 47 | 47 | 47 | 48 |

The above mentioned statements about learners' fondness for grammar learning, the level of interest it provokes, grammar learning difficulty, comprehensibility and necessity were grouped together and compared to learners' perceived level of success. The results (table 21) show that there is a strong positive correlation between learners' attitude and perceived level of success. This means that learners who have a more positive attitude towards grammar also believe to be more successful at it (table 21). There also exists a strong positive correlation between their perceived level of success and their average grammar grade which shows that learners were objective in the assessment of their success in grammar.

Table 21: Correlation between learners' perceived level of success and attitude towards grammar

| | | What is your average grammar grade? | Attitude |
|--|---------------------|-------------------------------------|----------|
| Assess your level of English language grammar knowledge | Pearson Correlation | .745** | .584** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .000 |
| | N | 200 | 193 |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

These results suggest that learners' achievement and success in grammar influences their beliefs. The results were further investigated in terms of comparing the beliefs of more successful students with those of lower level of success where learners were grouped according to their self-assessment of their grammar knowledge. Learners who graded their knowledge with 3 or less were considered less successful and learners who graded themselves with grade 4 or 5 were considered more successful. Mean score comparison of the two groups in table 22 indicate that there is a considerable difference in the attitude of learners who perceive themselves to be more successful in grammar and the ones who believe their success to be lower (table 23). More successful learners hold a more positive attitude towards grammar and vice versa.

Table 22: Comparison of the beliefs of more successful and less successful learners

| Assess your level of English language grammar knowledge | | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|------|-----|--------|----------------|-----------------|
| Attitude | >= 3 | 163 | 3.3620 | .86342 | .06763 |
| | < 3 | 30 | 2.3667 | .65566 | .11971 |

Moreover, in order to investigate whether this difference between the two groups is statistically significant, an independent t-test was conducted. “Sig.” value of .00 (table 23) indicates that there is a statistically significant difference in the attitude of the two groups meaning that the attitude of more successful learners towards grammar is significantly more positive than the one of weaker learners.

Table 23: Comparison of the beliefs of more successful and less successful learners: independent samples test

| t-test for Equality of Means | | | |
|------------------------------|-------|-----|-----------------|
| Attitude | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
| | 5.998 | 191 | .000 |

Finally, last research question aimed to investigate the relationship between learners’ perceived level of success and their perception of grammar teaching methods. In order to investigate this, correlation between learners’ grammar knowledge self-assessment and their attitude towards grammar teaching methods was conducted (table 24). Results show that there is a strong positive correlation between learners’ perception of success and the degree to which they like to participate in classroom activities meaning that learners who find themselves more successful in grammar are also more willing to participate in grammar activities.

Table 24: Correlation between learners' perception of success and grammar teaching approaches

| | | I like to participate in grammar activities in the classroom. |
|--|---------------------|---|
| Assess your level of English language grammar knowledge | Pearson Correlation | .406** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 |
| | N | 198 |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

What was also investigated was the difference between the beliefs of learners who believe to be more successful in grammar and those who find themselves less successful. The criterion for forming the two groups was the same as in table 22. The comparison of the mean scores from both groups for both explicit and implicit teaching (table 25) shows that there is a slight difference in the beliefs of the two groups. Learners who believe to be more successful were more likely to express agreement with the necessity of both explicit and implicit instruction, although, generally speaking, explicit instruction was slightly more valued than implicit one by both groups. This is in accordance with the results from the fourth research question which showed that, generally speaking, learners prefer explicit teaching significantly more than implicit one (table 14).

Table 25: The relationship between learners' success and their perception of grammar teaching methods

| Assess your level of English language grammar knowledge | | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|--|------|-----|------|----------------|-----------------|
| Explicit teaching | >= 3 | 167 | 4.33 | .908 | .070 |
| | < 3 | 31 | 3.94 | 1.063 | .191 |
| Implicit teaching | >= 3 | 167 | 3.36 | 1.300 | .101 |
| | < 3 | 31 | 2.77 | 1.230 | .221 |

Independent samples t-test was conducted in order to investigate if there is a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of the two groups. Test results (table 26) indicated that there is a significant difference in the perception of both the importance of implicit and explicit teaching between the two groups of learners (explicit teaching: $p=.032$, implicit teaching $p=.021$). This means that learners who believe to be more successful value both explicit and implicit teaching significantly more than learners who believe to be less successful in grammar learning.

Based on these results, it is possible to suggest that learners' perceived level of success does not influence their perception of grammar teaching methods to a greater extent since both groups preferred explicit teaching. However, learners' success does influence the level of their appreciation for the two teaching methods meaning that more successful learners recognize the need for both teaching methods slightly more.

Table 26: The relationship between learners' success and their perception of grammar teaching methods – Independent samples test

| t-test for Equality of Means | | | |
|------------------------------|-------|-----|-----------------|
| Explicit teaching | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
| | 2.158 | 196 | .032 |
| Implicit teaching | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
| | 2.320 | 196 | .021 |

5. Discussion

The first research question aimed to investigate learners' beliefs about grammar. The results indicate that, on average, every second learner in Croatian high-school classrooms is reluctant to learn grammar and that most Croatian students prefer all other language areas to grammar. Such results are a serious warning signal to teachers. The reasons behind such findings might come from a combination of different underlining factors. Although this study aimed to investigate the ways in which Croatian students perceive grammar, it did not go into the depths of finding the actual reasons behind such beliefs and attitudes. However, the results presented above do scratch the surface of these issues. For example, the causes of such attitudes can, to a certain extent, be analyzed by looking into learners' open-ended responses where most of them described grammar as "boring", "difficult" and "unintelligible".

The second aspect of investigating learners' beliefs about grammar called for an investigation of their beliefs about grammar learning difficulty, necessity, comprehensibility and the level of interest it provokes. Learners hold neutral opinions about most of these categories with the exception of grammar learning necessity which was rated much higher. This means that despite their general negative beliefs about grammar, learners do understand both the need to learn grammar and the importance of continuous grammar study. They find grammar important for both extrinsic and intrinsic reasons; however, the most important reason is passing national state exams. Similar results were reported by Manley and Calk (1997) who found out that learners held the belief that grammar is important in language learning. Moreover, Loewen et al (2009) and Brown (2009) also report similar results where some of the top reasons for grammar study were: professional competence, confidence, TOEFL, communication and getting a good job. Such results show that learners are capable to critically assess the reasons behind grammar activities in the classroom. Their mature approach proves that they can make a valuable positive contribution to the learning processes in the classroom as its active participants. The fact that learners do recognize the importance of grammar proves that they can recognize and understand the rationale behind learning grammar and explicit grammar activities in the classroom.

Within the first research question, learners' beliefs were also investigated in terms of their beliefs about grammar teaching approaches. This question is particularly interesting since it is quite possible that learners' negative beliefs about grammar come from some previous negative grammar learning experiences or that their teachers have not used suitable grammar teaching strategies. Moreover, in their responses, some learners did mention bad teaching approaches by their teachers as the causes of such negative beliefs. Furthermore, when asked to rate some of the prerequisites for successful grammar teaching, learners rated suitable teaching approach and enough examples from context the highest which shows that they recognize the importance of suitable teaching strategies used in the classroom. All of these findings suggest that learners recognize grammar teaching methods as an important factor for grammar learning. It is then highly likely that the teaching methods they were exposed to during their school years played an important role in shaping their beliefs about grammar.

Another important shaping factor that influences learners' beliefs may be the fact that most learners do experience difficulties in grammar learning. Results clearly show that learners who experience difficulties in grammar learning tend to be more reluctant to learn grammar. It is important to notice that most learners attribute such difficulties to a big amount of information and subject matter presented in the classroom, while at the same time recognizing the importance of suitable grammar teaching strategies and approaches. This is why the issues of learners' opinions, teaching strategies and learners' level of success are deeply related issues that cannot be viewed independently.

The second research question aimed to investigate the connection between learners' beliefs and their perceived level of success in grammar learning. The findings suggest that success plays an important role in forming learners' beliefs about grammar because learners who believe to be more successful in grammar learning are also more likely to find grammar comprehensible and show greater preference of grammar. They are also more willing to participate in grammar activities in the classroom and, generally speaking, expressed a more positive overall attitude towards grammar. Such results are in accordance with the results of some previous research (Brown, 2009, Asbjornson, 1999) which also indicated that more proficient speakers of English held more positive beliefs about grammar and that they enjoyed studying grammar more (Asbjornson, 1999).

Finally, the third research question aimed at investigating the relationship between learners' beliefs and their perception of grammar teaching methods. Results show that both groups of learners, those who believe to be more successful and those who consider themselves less successful, recognize the need to focus on grammatical forms and explicit rules, but also the importance of being exposed to the context and using the language for real-life communication. Both groups did, however, show a higher level of appreciation for explicit teaching which might be a result of their previous grammar teaching experiences or the possibility that they are not fully aware of grammar learning taking place in contextual tasks. There was also a significant difference between the levels of appreciation of the two teaching approaches between the two groups meaning that more successful learners rated both implicit and explicit teaching significantly more than less successful learners. The explanation might be that more successful learners have also developed a deeper understanding of the teaching approaches and meta-language in class in general which makes them more aware of its importance. Some previous research (Ismail, 2012, Schulz, 2001, Brown, 2009) revealed the same results: learners strongly believe that explicit grammar instruction could play a positive role in foreign language learning and they prefer to have formal grammar instruction over communicative exchanges. For example, learners from Schulz' study (2001) indicated clearly that they preferred to be taught in that way as the formal study of grammar helped them keep the rules of grammar in mind when communicating with others.

6. Methodological implications

The above mentioned findings may be extremely valuable to teachers since they open up a possibility for them to recognize their learners' needs and adapt their teaching strategy. Knowing that most learners hold negative beliefs about grammar helps teachers to approach this language area with special attention. This awareness can open up a dialogue between learners and teachers and could be an important starting point in fighting learners' prejudices and negative attitudes towards grammar.

Since learners, despite their negative beliefs, understand and recognize the importance of grammar and the need to learn it, teachers can use this realization to explain the basic rationale

behind grammar activities in class. They should start viewing learners as partners in creating and implementing classroom activities and improving the process of learning. It can also help to bring teachers and learners closer together when it comes to setting the right expectations from the learning process.

However, it is not only important for the teachers to open themselves more to learners needs and inputs but they should also work on a continuous self-development and improvement of their grammar teaching knowledge and approaches. Since previous learning experiences and success play an important role in forming learner's beliefs and attitudes, teachers should also find ways to devote more time to weaker learners since their lack of success usually drives their negative attitudes towards grammar and could be a stepping stone to their motivation and process of learning. One of the ways to fight learners prejudice is for the teachers to employ stronger students and use them to help weaker ones and especially the ones experiencing difficulties. Learners who are more successful at grammar tend to hold more positive beliefs about it and they can transfer such positive attitude to other learners and, therefore, influence the learning process in a positive way.

If the teachers clearly communicate the basic rationale behind grammar activities in class and set clear expectations together with the learners and if learners, on the other hand, recognize teacher's efforts to collect and take into consideration their interests and needs, the result can be a significant improvement in the motivation of both sides. As a result, learners can also become more willing to participate in grammar learning activities and experience less challenges in overcoming them. Learners and teachers can then become equal partners in the process of learning, strengthening their cooperation in class and working together towards improving the learning process.

7. Study limitations

First, this research does not aim to provide the answer to the question of the best approach to teaching grammar or the issue how grammar should be taught. It only investigates learners' general beliefs about grammar learning and teaching with an attempt to bring them into a relationship with actual grammar teaching practices. The purpose of the research is to investigate

how learners feel about grammar activities in their classrooms and grammar learning in general and to identify key challenges they face along the way. It offers only a limited overview of perception of grammar in class because it does not look into teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching. It would be beneficial to conduct a more thorough research into both teachers' and learners' beliefs to get an overview of the potential similarities and discrepancies between their beliefs and their implications for teaching.

Second, the results in this research are based on learners' self-assessment of their grammar knowledge which questions the reliability of some of the results. Testing learner's knowledge and a detailed analysis of their test scores would provide a more objective assessment of their grammar knowledge. This, however, was not possible in this research due to limited research time and the danger of compromising learners' anonymity.

Next, some previous studies (Pazaver and Wang, 2009) show that there are differences in learners' perceptions of grammar teaching methods and that these differences are a result of their different cultural and educational backgrounds. This research, however, does not provide any information about such background factors that might influence learners' opinions. Since the sample consists only of Croatian high-school students with similar educational background and level of knowledge, the study results are relevant only for this geographical area and cultural and educational context.

Finally, the instrument used in this study is a custom designed questionnaire with items of limited choice of answers that do not provide a deeper understanding of learners' responses. The questionnaire aims to gather mostly quantitative data and a more detailed analysis of the reasons behind learners' responses is not available, only an overview of their general opinions and beliefs. However, results from this study may be a good starting point for a more thorough investigation into both learners' and teachers' beliefs about grammar.

8. Conclusion

Although the area of grammar teaching in second language acquisition has been intensely investigated in the past, researcher rarely looked into learners' beliefs and attitudes. However, one of the most important factors for successful grammar teaching and learning is for the teachers to become aware of students' beliefs and attitudes towards grammar as well as their learning styles in order to be able to develop suitable strategies that can meet their interests and needs.

The results of this research revealed that most learners in Croatian high schools perceive grammar in a negative way and show reluctance to learn it. Although the study did not go into the depth of finding the exact reasons behind such attitudes, it did point to some interesting key notions which can be a good starting point for a more thorough investigation into both learners' and teachers' beliefs about grammar. It showed that most learners hold negative beliefs about grammar, perceiving it as boring and involving too much information. Most of them also experience difficulties when learning grammar. These findings are a serious warning sign to the teachers and can be extremely valuable and enable them to adapt their grammar teaching approach in class. In other words, teachers need to be aware of what goes on both in the classroom and learners minds and adapt their grammar teaching approaches accordingly. They need to continuously improve their teaching knowledge and skills and being aware of their learners needs is just the first step towards achieving this.

However, teachers do not necessarily have to be the sole creators of grammar teaching approaches and activities. Results indicate that most learners understand the need to learn grammar, both for extrinsic and intrinsic reasons, thus showing their maturity and ability to understand the reasons behind grammar activities in class. In this way, learners prove that they can be valuable sources of feedback in the classroom and teachers' allies in improving the current teaching strategies and classroom cooperation. Moreover, some of teachers' strongest allies in this process can be stronger students. Since they are less likely to experience difficulties in grammar learning and generally speaking have more positive beliefs about grammar, they can influence other learners in a positive way.

Once teachers' and learners engage in a meaningful dialogue where teachers explain the basic reasons behind grammar activities and learners express their learning needs, grammar learning becomes more enjoyable. As the result, learners develop a more positive attitude towards grammar and develop a stronger motivation to participate in grammar activities.

9. Literature

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10. Appendix 1: Questionnaire

ANKETNI UPITNIK

Priloženi anketni upitnik dio je istraživanja u okviru izrade diplomskog rada na studiju anglistike čiji je cilj ispitati stavove učenika o učenju gramatike engleskog jezika. Anketa je anonimna, a podatci povjerljivi. Molim vas, pažljivo pročitajte pitanja i zaokružite odgovore koji najbolje opisuju vaše mišljenje. Hvala!

Dob: _____

Spol: M Ž

Godina učenja engleskog jezika: _____

Ocjena iz engleskog jezika na kraju polugodišta: _____

- 1. Ocijenite sljedeća područja engleskog jezika prema tome koliko ih volite:** (1= najmanje volim, 5= najviše volim)

| | | | | | |
|-----------|---|---|---|---|---|
| vokabular | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| gramatika | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| čitanje | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| pisanje | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| slušanje | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| govorenje | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

- 2. Zaokružite broj koji najbolje opisuje vaše mišljenje:**

Gramatika engleskog jezika je:

| | | | | | | |
|--------------|---|---|---|---|---|------------|
| dosadna | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | zanimljiva |
| teška | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | lagana |
| nerazumljiva | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | razumljiva |
| nepotrebna | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | potrebna |

Molim vas, obrazložite svoj odgovor:

- 3. Pažljivo pročitajte sljedeće tvrdnje i zaokružite odgovor koji se odnosi na vas:**

(1 = uopće se ne slažem, 2 = uglavnom se ne slažem, 3= niti se slažem niti se ne slažem, 4 = uglavnom se slažem , 5 = potpuno se slažem)

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Učenje gramatike pomaže u svladavanju engleskog jezika. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Usvajanje gramatičkih pravila preduvjet je uspješne komunikacije. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Učenje gramatike je nužno. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Gramatika omogućuje učinkovitiju komunikaciju. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Poznavanje gramatike pridonosi jačanju samopouzdanja. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Poznavanje gramatike važno je zbog budućeg zaposlenja. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Poznavanje gramatike važno je zbog polaganja državne mature. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

4. Pažljivo pročitajte sljedeće tvrdnje i zaokružite odgovor koji se odnosi na vas:

(1 = uopće se ne slažem, 2 = uglavnom se ne slažem, 3= niti se slažem niti se ne slažem, 4 = uglavnom se slažem , 5 = potpuno se slažem)

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Volim sudjelovati u gramatičkim aktivnostima na satu. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| U učionici bih volio/voljela više gramatičkih sadržaja. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Učenje gramatike je učinkovitije ako se učenicima prvo jasno prezentiraju gramatička pravila, a tek onda rješavaju zadatke. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Učenje gramatike je učinkovitije ako se gramatička pravila uče nesvjesno, kroz kontekst. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

5. Doživljavate li poteškoće u svladavanju gramatike engleskog jezika? da ne
Ako da, koji je uzrok tome? (Ako ne doživljavate poteškoće u svladavanju gramatike, preskočite pitanje.)

(1 = uopće se ne slažem, 2 = uglavnom se ne slažem, 3= niti se slažem niti se ne slažem, 4 = uglavnom se slažem , 5 = potpuno se slažem)

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a) puno informacija i gradiva | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b) to što je drukčija od gramatike hrvatskog jezika | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| c) profesor ne objasni gradivo dovoljno jasno | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| d) nedovoljno gramatičkih sadržaja na satu | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| e) nemam radne navike | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

6. Pažljivo pročitajte sljedeće tvrdnje i zaokružite odgovor koji se odnosi na vas:

(1 = uopće se ne slažem, 2 = uglavnom se ne slažem, 3= niti se slažem niti se ne slažem, 4 = uglavnom se slažem , 5 = potpuno se slažem)

Za uspješno svladavanje gramatike potrebno je:

| | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| a) kontinuirano učenje | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b) prikladne metode poučavanja | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| c) prirodni instinkt | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| d) što više praktičnih primjera iz jezika /konteksta | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| e) pažljivo praćenje na satu | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| f) dobro predznanje | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

7. Procijenite svoju razinu poznavanja gramatike engleskog jezika:

1 2 3 4 5

8. Koja je vaša prosječna ocjena iz gramatike na kraju polugodišta?

1 2 3 4 5