

Perceptions of Grammatical Items by Thai EFL Students in an English Grammar Foundation Course

การรับรู้หัวข้อทางไวยากรณ์โดยนิสิตไทยที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ
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Abstract

The perceptions of Thai first-year students were studied regarding grammatical items in an English grammar foundation course in a regular English program. A questionnaire was used to distinguish levels of these students' perceptions throughout the first semester of the 2016 academic year. The survey covered five chapters: 1) principal elements of sentences; 2) nouns and articles; 3) verbs and verbals; 4) pronouns, substitution and ellipsis, and 5) adjectives and adverbs. The results indicated that students in all groups rated the grammatical items at a high level in all chapters. However, students suggested that there should not be so many grammar items or points in the course book as this was time-consuming. The main recommendation was that teaching English grammar to students should be based on a number of perspectives of functional contexts in which students have more opportunities to engage with deeper understanding and realization on language use and meaning making. The findings will aid in the effective development, and updating of teaching materials.

Keywords: 1.Grammatical items 2.Thai EFL students' perceptions 3.English grammar foundation course

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Introduction

It is argued that English structure or English grammar plays a vital role in helping learners become successful in their language studies (Bardovi-Harlig 2000, Ellis 2006a, Shiu 2011). However, substantial studies (Pongsiriwet2001, Tapinta 2006) indicated that Thai students still have greater problems in learning English grammar. That is, it is argued they lack comprehension on fundamental structures and cannot learn English structures at a higher level effectively. Another reason for this obstacle is the learners themselves. They do not learn grammatical structures and practice much and their learning on grammatical topics is not systematic. Lack of greater opportunities in practicing grammatical topics with a systematic ordering of grammar points leads to failure and the wrong use of grammar rules when they study at a higher level. In addition, students cannot use English grammatical structures effectively and communicatively. In this regard, understanding students' perceptions about grammatical items is considered a crucial factor for teachers to prepare effective and appropriate learning materials for students to use for successful learning.

Therefore, based on the importance of the problems discussed, this study aimed to explore students' perceptions of grammatical topics and items which they learnt from a course "Introduction to English Grammar and Structure" in a regular English program throughout the first semester of the 2016 academic year which is a requirement for all first year students at the English Department, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Science, Kasetsart university, Kamphaeng Saen Campus. This study will provide useful information for developing course materials for course updates and increasing the effectiveness of students' learning in higher English grammar courses.

Literature review

Study of English grammar is an interesting topic of research with a long history of development because it is a crucial factor that helps develop learners' knowledge and competency on the use of effective communication. Substantial studies, for example, Krashen (1985), Bardovi-Harlig (2000), Ellis (1991, 2006a, 2008, 2009b,) encompassed theories and analysis on learners' language and included studies that focused on the students' perception of grammatical structure. In recent decades, there have been different grammatical studies (Green & Hecht 1992, 1997a, 2000, Larsen-Freeman 2003a, Hinkel 2004, Leow 1997a, 2000, Rosa & Leow 2004; Shiu 2011,) that indicated English grammatical learning affected learners'

ability when they had to study at a higher level and this is an indicator for assessing successful language learning.

There have been many studies on teaching grammar. Bardovi-Harlig (1998) explored the practice and awareness of grammar use by learners in real situations. The 543 participants in this study were students and teachers who studied English as a foreign language (EFL) in Hungary and in the United States of America, and 112 Italian learners who also participated in the project by way of recording 20 dramas. The results of the study showed that the EFL Italian learners made mistakes in drama performances and grammar tests. On the other hand, ESL learners and teachers made more mistakes in their performance than in English grammar tests.

In terms of teaching grammar to students, Phissanui (2003) studied the development of activities on English grammar using a cooperative method. She discovered that overall, students had a higher ability in English grammar with average scores of after-lesson evaluation from 3.77 to 4.47. The findings of this study highlighted the benefits of using a variety of methods for teaching grammar.

In another study in a Thai context, Mahakanok (2005) studied the development of computer-assisted learning programs on grammar and found that using different materials such as images, colors, and sound motivated students well. That is, the researcher indicated that learning units consisting of a variety of approaches and not only multiple choice test items, would help students to have better learning outcomes.

Pazaver and Wang (2009) investigated Asian students' perceptions of grammar teaching in the ESL classroom and found that although they came from similar cultural and educational backgrounds, the Asian students' perceptions of form-focused instruction varied widely and their different perspectives were based on their previous language learning experiences, their language proficiency, current academic needs, and future career choices. The researchers concluded that the information gathered was of significant value to ESL teachers who intended to meet students' needs as well as reduce the conflicts caused by different perspectives between teachers and students regarding whether or not grammar teaching should be encouraged in the classroom.

Jarvis and Szymczyk (2010) reported on a study which examined students' attitudes to learning grammar in autonomous contexts and their preferences for the learning materials with which to do so. In the study, 38 students were surveyed and 13 of them then spent some time working in a language resource centre (LRC) with web-based and paper-based materials.

Then, the researchers asked students to complete a series of questionnaires concerning what they liked and disliked about the two types of materials. Subsequently, four participants were interviewed in more detail about their responses. The data suggested that despite the well-documented advantages of the tutorial role of computers and the notion of the 'digital native', participants generally preferred working with paper-based materials. The study concluded with a discussion of the implications of this for materials that LRCs stock and for the changing role of computers in self-study contexts.

Hu (2012) considered whether or not grammar should be taught. The findings of the study confirmed that grammar is a subject matter that should be taught in forms of structure and its application. It was recommended that teaching grammar should focus on real contextual use. However, Myyry (2013) studied grammatical perception of high school students and found that students had a negative attitude toward grammar learning because they did not understand the structures which they considered too difficult and this affected most students in terms of their inability to use grammar correctly. The study also indicated that this problem was related to teaching methods and learning materials which were not interesting and so did not create better understanding for students.

Hou & Na-Thalang (2013) investigated the awareness of English grammar on the use of Wh-movement with Chinese learners. The results of the study revealed that if the learners understood the principle of English grammar deliberately, when they wanted to create Wh-questions, they could complete the questions correctly. Moreover, Munir (2009) studied the grammar awareness of primary school English teachers. The results showed that the teachers did not understand and use grammar very well. That is, they did not have metalinguistic awareness and they should have been able to analyze the structure of grammar items better before they studied at a higher level.

Sopin (2015) studied students' perceptions of grammar teaching and learning in English language classrooms in Libya and she found that although the students all came from the similar cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds, they had different perceptions regarding the form-focused grammar instruction. The study suggested that the information gathered is of considerable significance to ESL teachers who intend to meet students' needs as well as reduce conflicts caused by different perspectives between teachers and students regarding whether or not grammar teaching should be encouraged in the classroom.

In another study, Imhan & Kim (2017) found that despite the consistent emphasis on grammar instruction in English classrooms in South Korea, studies regarding grammar instruction have not yet been extensively conducted. Therefore, their study aimed to discover the gap between learners' grammatical awareness and their perception of major grammatical items. A total of 60 EFL learners from two local universities in South Korea participated in their study and were divided into two groups: a high-level and a low-level group and a set of tests was utilized to examine learners' grammatical awareness and their perception of six major grammatical items: tense, prepositions, articles, voices, morphology, and vocabulary. The results demonstrated that there was a significant difference in the scores for tense, article, and voice regarding grammatical awareness between the high-level and the low-level groups. The study also indicated both groups had high scores for the category of voice while they received low scores for vocabulary and morphology. In addition, there was a significant difference in the scores for the perceived difficulty of articles and voice. The high-level group perceived voice as the most difficult, whereas the low-level group perceived articles as the most difficult. These findings demonstrated a gap between the learners' grammar awareness and perception and highlighted a need to design an individualized curriculum for the effectiveness of teaching as well as self-initiated study.

From the review of the studies discussed, it can be concluded that studies on grammar and students' opinions, grammar teaching methods, and other related matters play an important role on students' language learning achievements. Most studies indicated the importance of grammatical studies and supported different methods of teaching grammar to students which involved meaning making and metalinguistic awareness. Therefore, understanding students' perceptions about grammatical items is an essential factor for English language teachers to consider and be aware of when they teach grammar to students and the current study attempted to bridge this issue as a concern when appropriate grammatical items are arranged in a grammar course.

Purpose of the study

The study aimed to explore the levels of first-year students' perceptions of grammatical items in the regular English program in the course "Introduction to English Grammar and Structure" at Faculty of Liberal Arts and Science, Kasetsart University, Kamphaeng Saen Campus, Thailand

Research question

What are the levels of first-year students' perceptions of grammatical items in the regular English program in the course "Introduction to English Grammar and Structure" at Faculty of Liberal Arts and Science, Kasetsart University, Kamphaeng Saen Campus?

Methodology

1.1 Ethical process

The study was granted permission and funding from the English Department, Kasetsart University, Kamphaeng Saen Campus in the first semester of the 2016 academic year. The participants were informed about the ethics of the study. The researcher informed the participants before they completed the questionnaire that responding to the questionnaire did not have any effects on their scores and grading.

1.2 Participants

The researcher, as the lecturer, provided the course outline and introduction to 120 students (three groups): Group 700 (31 students), Group 701 (44 students), and Group 702 (45 students). All students had majored in English in a regular English program at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Science, Kasetsart University, Kamphaeng Saen Campus in the first semester of the 2016 academic year. The first hour of teaching covered the introduction, guidelines and procedures for the course. Then, the researcher presented the chapters with elaborations and discussion to the students over the following 15 weeks.

1.3 Research tool and data collection

This study involved a survey which was undertaken after the course "Introduction to English Grammar and Structure" (03155116) which is a required course for Thai tertiary students who major in English at Kasetsart University, Kamphaeng Saen campus. The survey used a questionnaire based on the scale of Likert (1981) which was adjusted to three rating scales (high, moderate and low) of perceptions which contained all grammatical items that students learnt in the class as: 2.31–3.00, high; 1.61–2.30, moderate; 1.00–1.60, low. The questionnaire was checked by three EFL experts for its contents and IOC (Index of Item-Objective Congruence) was .85.

In detail, all grammatical items which were presented in Schaum's Outline of English Grammar (Second Edition) by Ehrenrich & Murphy (1991) in each chapter were put in the questionnaire in order of difficulty. That is, the contents of the book were divided into six chapters as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1 Chapter summary of the book

Chapter 1 principle elements of the sentences	(verb, subject, direct object, complement, indirect object, modifiers, multiple-word modifiers, clauses, phrases);
Chapter 2 nouns and articles	(nouns, noun functions, types of nouns, plural forms of nouns, possessive forms of nouns, collective nouns, noun clauses, articles (definite and indefinite articles)
Chapter 3 verbs and verbals	which consist of verbs, predicate, transitive and intransitive verbs, copulative (linking) verbs, auxiliary verbs, mood, voice, number, person tense, consistency of verbs, verbals, infinitive, participle, gerund, verbals used as modifiers, dangling and misplaced modifiers, auxiliary verbs and infinitives in compound constructions, parallel structure and verb forms;
Chapter 4 pronouns	which consist of pronouns, types of pronouns, pronoun agreement, pronoun in the subjective case, pronoun in the possessive case, pronoun as appositives ;
Chapter 5 adjectives	which consist of types of adjectives, position of adjectives, adjective phrases, adjective clauses, nouns used as adjectives, participles as adjectives, infinitives as adjectives;
Chapter 6 adverbs	which consist of recognizing adverbs, distinguishing adverbs from adjectives, comparison of adverbs ,nouns and phrases used as adverbs, adverbial clauses, conjunctive adverbs, intensifiers, infinitives as adverbs.

In terms of teaching, the chapters were divided into two phases: midterm (chapters 1–3) and final (chapters 4–6). The course was held over 15 weeks with 45 hours teaching time.

After the course, on the date of final examination, all students completed the questionnaire on the grammatical items in which they were asked to provide their perceptions on grammatical items in all the chapters that had studied in the course.

Data analysis

The students' responses of their perceptions on grammatical topics and items were analyzed using the mean (\bar{x}) and standard deviation (SD). Then, all chapters and sub-grammatical items in each chapter were compared.

Results

1. Overview of students' perceptions of all groups in all chapters

Table 2 Overview of students' perceptions in all chapters

Items	\bar{x}	S.D.	Interpretation
Chapter 1 Principal elements of sentence	2.42	0.61	high
Chapter 2 Nouns and articles	2.45	0.57	high
Chapter 3 Verbs and verbals	2.36	0.64	high
Chapter 4 Pronouns, substitution and ellipsis	2.31	0.61	high
Chapter 5 Adjectives and adverbs	2.32	0.59	high
Total	2.37	0.61	high

Table 2 indicates Chapter 2 (nouns and articles) had the greatest mean of grammatical perception ($(\bar{x})=2.45$, S.D.0.57) whereas Chapter 4 (pronouns, substitution and ellipsis) had the lowest mean ($(\bar{x})= 2.31$, S.D.=0.61). Most students had perceptions on grammatical topics and items at the high level for all chapters.

2. Students' perceptions of all groups in each chapter

Table 3 Students' perceptions in Chapter 1 Principal elements of sentence

Items	\bar{x}	S.D.	Interpretation
Chapter 1 Principal elements of sentence	2.42	0.61	high
1.1 Verb	2.59	0.52	high
1.2 Subject	2.61	0.55	high
1.3 Direct object	2.59	0.54	high
1.4 Complement	2.37	0.65	high
1.5 Indirect object	2.63	0.53	high
1.6 Modifiers	2.23	0.71	moderate
1.7 Multiple-word modifiers	2.15	0.58	moderate
1.8 Clauses	2.31	0.60	high
1.9 Phrases	2.32	0.59	high

Table 3 indicates that the overall mean of Chapter 1 (Principal elements of sentence) is 2.42 (\bar{x} =2.42, S.D.=0.61). The students rated Indirect object as the highest mean of 2.63 (S.D.0.53) in the high range. The mean of Modifiers is moderate at 2.23 (S.D.0.71) in the moderate range and the mean of Multiple-word modifiers is moderate at 2.15 (S.D.0.58) in the moderate range respectively.

Table 4 Grammatical perceptions of all groups in Chapter 2 Noun and article

Items	\bar{x}	S.D.	Interpretation
Chapter 2 Noun and article	2.45	0.57	high
2.1 Nouns	2.67	0.49	high
2.2 Noun functions	2.36	0.62	high
2.3 Types of nouns	2.45	0.56	high
2.4 Plural forms of nouns	2.42	0.57	high
2.5 Possessive forms of nouns, collective nouns	2.40	0.55	high
2.6 Noun clauses	2.40	0.57	high
2.7 Articles (Definite and indefinite articles)	2.45	0.60	high

Table 4 indicates that the overall mean of Chapter 2 (Noun and article) is 2.45 (\bar{x} =2.45, S.D.=0.57). The students rated Nouns as the highest mean at 2.67 (S.D.0.49) in the high range and the mean of Noun functions is lowest at 2.36 (S.D.0.56) in the high range respectively.

Table 5 Grammatical perceptions of all groups in Chapter 3 Verbs and verbals

Items	\bar{x}	S.D.	Interpretation
Chapter 3 Verbs and verbals	2.36	0.64	high
3.1 Verbs	2.70	0.51	high
3.2 Predicate	2.28	0.64	high
3.3 Transitive and intransitive verbs	2.52	0.60	high
3.4 Copulative (linking verbs)	2.55	0.60	high
3.5 Auxiliary verbs	2.52	0.58	high
3.6 Voice	2.34	0.59	high
3.7 Number	2.44	0.59	high
3.8 Person	2.47	0.61	high

Table 5 Grammatical perceptions of all groups in Chapter 3 Verbs and verbals

Items	\bar{x}	S.D.	Interpretation
3.9 Tense	2.08	0.70	moderate
3.10 Consistency of verbs	2.11	0.61	moderate
3.11 Verbals	2.18	0.65	moderate
3.12 Infinitive	2.31	0.64	high
3.13 Participle	2.26	0.67	moderate
3.14 Gerund	2.46	0.60	high
3.15 Verbals used as modifiers	2.16	0.66	average
3.16 Parallel structure and verb forms	2.31	0.62	high

Table 5 indicates that the overall mean of Chapter 3 (Verbs and verbals) is 2.36 (\bar{x} =2.36, S.D.=0.64). The highest mean of all grammatical items is on Copulative (linking verbs) which is at 2.55 (S.D.0.6) in the high range and the lowest mean the moderate range is on Tense which is at 2.08 (S.D.07) respectively.

Table 6 Grammatical perceptions of all groups in Chapter 4 Pronouns, substitution and ellipsis

Items	\bar{x}	S.D.	Interpretation
Chapter 4 Pronouns, substitution and ellipsis	2.31	0.61	high
4.1 Personal generic and possessive pronouns	2.48	0.56	high
4.2 Demonstrative and indefinite pronouns	2.39	0.53	high
4.3 Reflexive and reciprocal pronouns	2.49	0.58	high
4.4 Empty subject it	2.28	0.57	moderate
4.5 Empty subject there	2.24	0.61	moderate
4.6 Substitution: one and ones	2.19	0.63	moderate
4.7 Substitution: so and do so	2.11	0.61	moderate
4.8 Ellipsis	2.27	0.67	moderate

Table 6 indicates that the overall mean of Chapter 4 (Pronouns, substitution and ellipsis) is 2.31 (\bar{x} =2.31, S.D.=0.61). The highest mean of all grammatical items is on reflexive and reciprocal pronouns which is the highest at 2.49 (S.D.0.58) in the high range and the lowest mean in the moderate range is on Substitution: so and do so which is at 2.11 (S.D.0.61) respectively.

Table 7 Grammatical perceptions of all groups in Chapter 5 Adjectives and adverbs

Items	\bar{x}	S.D.	Interpretation
Chapter 5 Adjectives and adverbs	2.32	0.59	high
5.1 Adjective: emphasizing, describing, classifying	2.23	0.57	moderate
5.2 Adjectives: position and punctuation	2.29	0.54	moderate
5.3 Participle	2.35	0.60	high
5.4 Compound adjectives	2.24	0.61	moderate
5.5 Adjectives as nouns	2.41	0.57	high
5.6 Position of adverbs	2.33	0.59	high
5.7 Adverbs of place, time, frequency, expectation, focus	2.40	0.61	high
5.8 Adverbs of degree, manner, viewpoint, comment	2.24	0.63	moderate
5.9 Equatives, comparative and superlatives	2.41	0.61	high

Table 7 indicates that the overall mean of Chapter 5 is 2.32 (S.D.0.59) which is at high level (\bar{X} =2.32, S.D.=0.59). When looking at detail, the highest mean in the high range is on Equatives, comparative and superlatives which is at 2.41 (S.D.0.61) and the lowest mean in the moderate range is on Adjective: emphasizing, describing, classifying which is at 2.23 (S.D.0.57) respectively.

Discussion and Conclusion

1. From the analysis of the students' perceptions of grammatical items in each chapter of the course concerned, all chapters were rated at the high level which indicated that grammatical items in all chapters are important for students' learning and it is argued that the students understood and used the grammatical items effectively. This can be interpreted from the overview of final scores of all students which indicated that the midterm average score of all students was 41 and final average score of all students was 47 from the total score of 60 in each examination session.

2. It is argued that the course offered to the students was appropriate in terms of fundamental grammatical items. However, since this study focused on a quantitative rather than a qualitative method, the findings may not reflect the overall picture of the course. Therefore, it is better in the future for researchers to apply a qualitative method as well in order to reflect the effectiveness of the course. In addition, teaching English grammar and

structures should be done in a more communicative way to make sure that students would have an opportunity to deal with resources for making meanings in their learning.

3. Some students recommended that there should not be more traditional grammatical items in the course. Consequently, grammatical items should be carefully chosen and put in the course systematically. In this regard, it is considered that grammatical items which are already familiar to students may be removed from the course or perhaps only those considered to be difficult could be included. That is to say, more grammatical items should be put in the course in a functional context rather than a traditional way.

4. Students evaluated the grammatical items in all chapters at a high level. This suggested that the students understood the grammatical items effectively as a result of the teaching and learning processes in the classroom. However, in depth analysis showed that the greatest mean of all chapters was chapter 2 (nouns and articles) and this suggested that most students understood the grammatical items in this chapter better than other chapters. It is argued that nouns and articles were easy for the students since they might have already learnt these items before they studied in the course. Furthermore, the fact that chapter 3 (pronouns, substitution and ellipsis) had the lowest mean suggested that these grammatical items seemed difficult for the students since these items might have been new to them. Therefore, when preparing materials for the students, these grammatical items should be considered as important and should be a priority for student learning. In addition, to make the materials effective in this teaching context, more communicative activities should be put in each chapter to make sure that students are facilitated to learn English grammar at a higher level more effectively and consequently, they should perform better in their related higher courses.

Limitation of the study

Since this study was limited to only a single questionnaire, for future research, there should be studies using a qualitative approach such as individual interviews and group discussions with students. These may provide a broader view and understanding of the grammatical perceptions of prospective students. In addition, future studies could focus on other aspects of data collection such as focus group interviews, examination results, or other different grammatical pedagogies such as functional grammar and systemic functional grammar or other appropriate approaches. This would improve understanding on how students develop or are aware of their grammatical competence in real contexts. This is supported by Halliday's statement (2014, p.3) that "Language is, in the first instance, a resource for making meaning; so

text is a process of making meaning”. Teaching and learning grammar which focus on meanings that are embedded in contexts of culture and situations are very important for teachers and students. These concepts can be observed through the statement of Halliday (1978, p.23) that “The learner has to (1) process and produce text; (2) relate it to, and construe from it, the context of situation (3) build up the potential that lies behind this text and others like it; and (4) relate it to, and construe from it, the context of culture that lies behind that situation and others like it. These are not different components of the process, with separate activities attached to them; they are different perspectives on a single, unitary process.”

In addition, Martin (2000, 2002) states that when studying language, looking at genre and register is a very important way that can help understand how language and meaning are constructed. Therefore, using functional grammar for teaching students who enroll in English grammar courses will help them to develop successfully in terms of grammar learning and awareness connected with their preparation for studying English structures at a higher level.

Implications and recommendations

1. The findings of this study could be applied to improve the course or related higher courses in the future. However, further study should focus on functional contexts which may lead to creation of knowledge construction on English grammar and structures which are important and needed for students’ learning in Thai EFL contexts.

2. There is a need for studies that explore the relationship between students’ grammatical perception and their grades and achievements which may help broaden understanding on different contexts of teaching and learning grammar and may extend understanding on how students achieve their learning goals in the future.

3. Further studies should focus on the use of functional grammar and structures by students in different learning contexts and investigate how they learn and make meanings in exercises and tests.

4. There should be a study that may employ an in-depth interview with students before the course registration on how much they know English grammatical items and structures which would be useful for teachers to prepare suitable teaching materials for students.

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