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ABSTRACT

The role of grammar and the way it should be taught, that is separately or integrated within other language components, constitutes a perpetual debate in the field of foreign language learning and teaching. Consequently, the implicit and explicit nature of grammar instruction has been called into question owing to the existence of different theories, shifting views of the nature and role of grammar as well as varying language teaching approaches which make it difficult to pinpoint one definite grammar instruction method that fosters overall competency in a foreign language. Despite being able to provide rich and necessary data, student's perceptions on grammar knowledge and instruction appear to be limited. Hence this study investigates students' perceptions about learning Spanish grammar as a separate component of the Spanish courses in the BA Spanish programme at UWI St. Augustine. Primary data was solicited from seventeen, year three university students through the administration of questionnaires coupled with secondary sources which informed this study. The major findings revealed that the students generally have positive views of grammar and grammar instruction and are satisfied with grammar being taught separately. In fact, the preference for explicit, integrated form-focused grammar instruction was clearly expressed by the majority. These students' perceptions may serve to guide classroom practices and decisions as well as teaching approaches.

Keywords: Students' perceptions, foreign language learning, separately, integrated, form-focused grammar instruction, explicitness, implicitness, Spanish grammar, university students.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEFRL – Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

CLT – Communicative Language Teaching.

DMLL – Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics.

EFL – English as a Foreign Language.

FFI – Form Focused Instruction.

FLL – Foreign Language Learning.

UWI – University of the West Indies.

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INTRODUCTION

“Grammar constitutes serious and intellectually challenging content” (Ellis 106). This belief is echoed in the realms of foreign language pedagogy and is agreed upon by researchers, educators and students alike. The particularities of how, when, where and why grammar should be taught has been a point of contention in formal Foreign Language Learning (FLL), especially given the emergence and widespread traction of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches, originating in the early 1970’s (Burns 75). This heightened emphasis on communication and the promotion of meaningful and contextual language use challenged and has arguably demoted traditional grammar approaches to foreign language instruction which stressed the importance of learning grammatical features of a language. According to Celce-Murcia, grammar occupied a central role in these approaches “either as content for language teaching or as the organizing principle for curriculum or materials development” (460).

Given the revolutionary influence of CLT approaches and the subsequent debate over meaning versus form, the role of grammar and its efficacy in FLL has been questioned, garnering varying opinions. This is further complicated by the availability of differing delivery methods such as implicit and explicit forms of instruction which have been critiqued for its effectiveness in promoting successful FLL. It can therefore be deduced that teaching grammar is an immensely complex undertaking which withstands definitive or prescribed treatment. Consequently, an important consideration is the goal of the language program in which the student is involved. This will determine how grammar should be taught according to the perceived needs and desired level of proficiency that the student must possess upon completion of the program (Ly 189). In this way, school administrators, curriculum developers and educators are given the task of ensuring that the best decisions are taken to yield maximum success.

Of particular interest is the BA Spanish programme at the University of the West Indies (UWI). Admission into this programme, spearheaded by the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics (DMLL) requires that the student possess at minimum CAPE Spanish qualifications. This Spanish course is divided into three components which are taught separately; communicative grammar, reading and writing and listening and conversation which aim to “strengthen the students' proficiency in the Spanish language in the four major skill areas” as outlined by the University. Communicative grammar sessions constitute a weekly, two-hour long class. The programme follows the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) which fosters international cooperation and establishes standards for learning languages. According to the CEFRL, overall language proficiency is measured on a six-level scale ranging from a basic to a proficient user of the language. In the succeeding semesters, the lessons become increasingly complex as the goal is to equip students with advanced Spanish proficiency referred to as Level C1 in the CEFRL. This framework offers recommendations for all stakeholders in FLL to ensure that the student is equipped with the skills and knowledge to use a language for communication and act effectively, thus appreciating the importance of communicative competence (5-7).

The complex nature of grammar instruction warrants investigation into students' perceptions as it can offer valuable contributions that will foster more successful FLL. Boylu et al. stipulated that students' perceptions can have a profound effect on the learner's learning style and choices, inform the decisions taken in teaching programs as well as the teaching methods employed by foreign language educators (32). Hence, this study seeks to ascertain undergraduate students' perceptions about learning Spanish grammar as a separate component in the B.A Spanish programme as well as explore their overall views of the role of grammar in the FLL process.

Rationale

As a student of the aforementioned Spanish programme, the researcher was prompted by the frequent absenteeism being witnessed in year three Spanish grammar classes which also sparked concerns from the lecturer. Subsequently, the researcher began questioning whether the students did not see the importance of Spanish grammar which directly correlated to their actions.

Upon researching the topic, the literature indeed revealed the controversial nature of grammar teaching and learning, with various contradictory ideas which could possibly account for the absenteeism. Nonetheless, there appeared to be limited research from the perspective of learners, who are ultimately the most significant participants in FLL. Moreover, the researcher was unable to locate studies from Caribbean countries and even when some were found, they did not relate specifically to Spanish as a foreign language. In fact, most studies centred around university students pertained to the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context.

Consequently, this study seeks to add to existing data by investigating the students' perceptions about learning grammar as a separate component of the Spanish courses in the BA Spanish programme at UWI St. Augustine. The findings can inform the decision-making process as it relates to this BA Spanish programme by addressing students' perceived needs. In a broader sense, this study will present a Caribbean-based perspective of the views on Spanish foreign language grammar instruction specifically in the university context.

Parameters

The study examines students' perceptions in the BA Spanish programme at UWI St. Augustine, hence it is confined to one specific context, which is in Trinidad and Tobago since this

is the most accessible group of students to the researcher and therefore will not represent the perceptions of all students who learn grammar in this manner. The study focuses on Spanish grammar specifically since the researcher has seen first-hand, the absenteeism. Students pursuing French degree programmes were not included as grammar is not taught as an individual component. Additionally, year three university students were chosen as the target group participants since they have endured the most years of Spanish grammar learning overall as compared to first year students.

Objectives

This study intends to explore the varying perceptions of students toward learning Spanish grammar as a separate component of the Spanish courses as well as their view of the role of grammar in FLL. Furthermore, the student's preferred methods of grammar instruction for this specific programme will be determined.

Research Questions

- 1) What is the role of grammar in the foreign language learning process, according to the students?
- 2) How do students perceive learning grammar as a separate component of the Spanish courses in the BA Spanish programme at UWI, St. Augustine?
- 3) What are the students' preferred methods of grammar instruction for the Spanish courses they are pursuing?

Methodology

In this case study, research was focused on a bounded system by examining students' perceptions from multiple participants in one specific educational context. Qualitative research was employed

as it was seen as most appropriate. Collecting textual data was beneficial given the open-ended and subjective nature of the topic. The study subjects were asked to share their perspectives about learning grammar as a separate component of the Spanish courses in the BA Spanish programme. The researcher analysed data from the experiences of the participants who have undergone years of grammar instruction.

Moreover, questionnaires were selected as the preferred data collection method which allowed data to be solicited from a larger number of subjects in a convenient and timely manner (see Appendix A). The questionnaire consisted of twenty-two questions, five open-ended and seventeen close-ended questions, segregated into themes which serve to fulfil the researcher's objectives. The close-ended questions varied and included multiple choice questions, dichotomous questions and scaling questions which followed a 3 or sometimes 4-point Likert scale omitting the neutral option. This survey scale method, commonly used to retrieve opinions, was deemed appropriate by the researcher. The 'neutral' option was eliminated so as to avoid cop-out answers and encourage the participants to give a definite answer.

The open-ended questions included were straightforward, with the exception of two which required a more profound response such as "How do you define the term 'grammar' as it relates to foreign language learning and teaching?" or "How would you like Spanish grammar to be taught in the Spanish courses?" Overall, the goal of the questionnaire was to elicit student's perceptions, therefore, to stimulate maximum participation, the researcher utilized the least number of questions possible that were relatively simple yet focused and precise so that it did not appear to be a tedious task which could have reduced participation.

The questionnaire was administered via 'Google Forms' to the target group which encompassed twenty-five (Females= 24 and Males= 1) year three Spanish language students. Participation was

anonymous and voluntary. The only personal information required was the participant's age and gender. Coupled with the primary data, secondary sources were of central importance to the researcher.

The introductory section encompassed the rationale, parameters, objectives and methodology of this study. Subsequently, chapter one contains the literature review which presents the theoretical framework and a review of similar studies which provides context for and situates this study within existing literature. Chapter two records the findings of the study obtained from the questionnaire and finally, chapter three constitutes the discussion which interprets these findings. This paper ends with a conclusion that summates the research.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional views of Grammar

The word ‘grammar’ has proven to be a profound and complex term thus warranting intense research over the years. From its very definition, to the role it occupies in language learning and the way it is taught and learnt, grammarians, linguists and educators have struggled to keep up with its evolution. Nevertheless, the general consensus is that grammar is “highly systematic” and is an indisputable element of language learning upon which other aspects such as pronunciation and vocabulary are built upon (Cook 18).

Traditionally, grammar has been defined from varying perspectives such as prescriptivist, traditional and structuralist views. Firstly, Depraetere and Langford stated that prescriptive grammar “gives hard and fast rules about what is right (or grammatical) and what is wrong (or ungrammatical), often with advice about what not to say but with little explanation” (2). This grammar, also referred to as normative grammar, is typically found in textbooks and prescribes rules which emphasize a single and accurate form of language with little justification. Saaristo’s study conducted among foreign language, Finnish University students assesses their understanding of grammar. It was revealed that 25% of the respondents held what Saaristo classified as normative views often alluding to “formal correctness”, “norms” and “rules” in their definitions of grammar. The respondents stressed the need for ‘proper language’ specifically in the written modality (289-90) which is expected, given the nature of grammar in formal language learning contexts and the general stability of the written form.

Secondly, traditional grammar coincides with the prescriptive definition in that “it values the old language model, emphasizes written language and neglects oral language” (Xia 559). This

type of grammar focuses on parts of speech, its definitions and sets forth rules about how they should be synthesized. While Cook acknowledges that traditional grammar may still have a place in some modern FLL classrooms, she has criticized this type of grammar as one which negates context. Hence, while knowing the definition of a noun is vital, if its use is not exemplified in the appropriate context, the student does not know how to effectively employ the grammar (20). Thirdly, structural grammar refers to “the role of grammar as a description of the structures in language” (Saaristo 295). This view focuses on the combination of structural elements of grammar such as morphemes, words and phrases. In fact, Saaristo’s study demonstrated that the majority of students (51.3%) regarded grammar from a structural perspective, often referencing grammar as the ‘foundation’ or ‘basis’ of a language (295-96).

The impact of traditional grammar views on language learning

These conventional definitions of grammar influenced various language teaching approaches such as grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods which idealized direct instruction as the sole means of grammar instruction, characterized by drilling, repetition, controlled practice and memorization of rules (Burns 77). Furthermore, Richards postulated that language learning during this traditional era constituted a culmination of a repertoire of sentences and grammatical concepts which were expected to be produced accurately and rapidly when necessary (6). Consequently, a language lesson typically followed a P-P-P paradigm: Presentation, Practice and Production. This involved the introduction of a grammatical rule by the teacher, followed by controlled practice exercises and terminated by giving the student the opportunity to produce the target structure, unaided and liberally (Richards 8).

Functional Perspective

Subsequent to the traditional perspectives which concentrated on formal correctness and grammatical structure, a fairly new viewpoint arose in contemporary linguistics which appreciated the functionality of language, notably within varying cultural and social contexts. Burns posits that functional grammar takes a descriptive approach to language learning as it is concerned with how people actually use language rather than how it ought to be used. She states that “functional grammar looks at language used beyond the level of the sentence; a central idea here is text (78).” In Saaristo’s study, 12% of the respondents’ definitions of grammar reflected a functional perspective where the students referenced grammar as an imperative tool for language use and communication (292).

Communicative Language Teaching and the role of grammar

This new functional approach to language learning coupled with an aversion to the aforementioned traditional views, its resultant teaching methods and an overall shifting view, led to the emergence of CLT as they no longer fulfilled the goals of contemporary language teaching which many debated was to now attain communicative competence (Richards 9). CLT emerged from the works of anthropological and functional linguists such as Hymes and Halliday who regarded language as an instrument for communication. CLT challenged the intense concentration on grammatical competence defined by the CEFRL as “knowledge of, and ability to use, the grammatical resources of a language” (112) and focused on fostering communicative competence which refers to the possession of linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences which allow the speaker to use language effectively (CEFRL 108-109). Correspondingly, Burns indicated that this learner-centred, holistic approach was intended to simulate “natural and meaningful communication related to real life and to “authentic” use of language in various contexts” (79).

Notwithstanding, CLT is not without faults. Owing to the emphasis on interaction, this approach can potentially result in the unbalanced development of language skills, which tend to favour speaking and neglect writing. Furthermore, creating communicative tasks that predict the necessary skills for every spontaneous interaction is virtually impossible (Burns 79). Indubitably, the concern of paramount importance is the role of grammar within the CLT approach and its incorporation into the language curriculum. Richards stipulates that curriculum planners are now tasked with designing language courses, syllabi and classroom materials orchestrated around the communicative approach, therefore “grammar is no longer the starting point” (9). The communicative syllabus should be arranged according to subject matter, the desired pragmatic and semantic functions and should consist of task-based activities which are meaningful and contextualized (Celce-Murcia 461-62). Conversely, Bax asserts that while this emphasis on communication has been widely embraced for its benefits in FLL, failure to acknowledge the context in which language learning transpires may lead to the decentralization of CLT as the predominant paradigm. The heightened regard for communication relegates all other aspects as secondary and gives the impression that CLT will be appropriate and successful regardless of the context, even in situations where traditional approaches may still flourish (278-81).

Explicit and Implicit Grammar Instruction

The trivialization of grammar has raised concern as to whether it should be taught separately or integrated into classroom tasks. Thus, the degree of implicitness and explicitness of grammar instruction has been investigated in recent years. Although current findings have generally regarded explicit grammar instruction highly in FLL, some researchers still appear to be at odds, therefore necessitating further investigation (Nazari 157).

Some theorists suggest a more ‘natural’ approach to grammar instruction. Krashen infamously proposes in his input hypothesis theory that once the learner is exposed to comprehensible input and their affective filter is low, language acquisition will occur. Although his theory stems from the way children acquire their native language, he argues the same for adult second language learners (409-11). Krashen believes that the learner will attain grammatical proficiency from meaningful interaction so that the focus is not on form rather on meaning. Consequently, he dismisses the need for raising conscious awareness of grammar structures in formal FLL environments (Burns 79-80). Propositions like these have promoted implicit grammar instruction which allow learners to infer grammatical rules without conscious effort as described by Ellis (16). Implicit instruction provides the learner with sufficient input, often integrated into communicative activities, which inadvertently accentuates rules and patterns without overtly highlighting them, which are then internalized. Hence, this type of grammar instruction “creates a learning environment that is ‘enriched’ with the target feature, but without drawing learners’ explicit attention to it” (Ellis 16-17). Implicit knowledge of a language is typically associated with a native speaker who gains grammatical competence naturally rather than through formal instruction, cultivating knowledge that is tacit, intuitive and not verbalizable, therefore it is readily available for fluent and spontaneous language use (Scheffler and Cinciala 13).

Although some researchers believe that this process should be mirrored in adult FLL, Ellis posits that these learners require “additional resources of explicit learning” as they do not retain the same grammatical structures implicitly from communicative contexts as native speakers (1-2). Explicit grammar instruction represents direct intervention in the FLL process. It fosters the learner’s metalinguistic awareness and therefore constitutes deliberate and direct explanation of grammatical structures followed by practice activities (Ellis 17). While Ling highlights the

conscious awareness of grammatical form that is inherent to explicit instruction since rules are taught separately and in a controlled manner, she critiques this method, viewing it as less effective in stimulating communicative competence. Alternatively, it emphasizes grammatical accuracy (557). Nonetheless, Ellis asserts that implicit and explicit instruction do not necessarily equate to implicit and explicit learning. The former is based on an external perspective hence this decision is usually taken by stakeholders whereas the latter is directly associated with the learner.

Efficacy of implicit and explicit grammar instruction

The literature has disclosed a clear predilection for explicit grammar instruction. Norris and Ortega demonstrated in their meta-analysis of second language instruction that explicit grammar instruction was more effective than implicit instruction. Opposingly, Burns found that educators of adult foreign language learners disagreed with the isolation of grammar instruction from other language domains and expressed the need for contextualized grammar instruction, integrated within communicative activities, an approach they believed to be more effective (80-83). Nazari's study investigated the effect of implicit and explicit grammar instruction on elementary school, foreign language students' performance. It illustrated that students who received explicit presentation of the tested grammar structure outperformed those who were taught under implicit conditions. Even though the participants were elementary school students, the results concur with previous studies, that explicit grammar instruction is highly effective.

Isolated and Integrated Form Focused Instruction (FFI)

Lightbown and Spada have advocated the need for explicit form-focused instruction in formal FLL. They have accredited physiological changes and the constraints of a classroom setting among other reasons for the difficulty encountered by adult foreign language learners in attaining

native-like competency in the language (182). They concluded that an effective approach to teaching grammar relies on drawing the learner's attention to both meaning and form and have proposed two types of explicit, Form-Focused Instruction (FFI). Firstly, in isolated FFI, linguistic form is separated from communicative or content-based activities. This type of FFI signifies intentional learning where grammatical form is clearly highlighted before or after communicative activities as opposed to integrated FFI where focus on form occurs during the communicative activity. The grammatical form in focus may be pre-planned by the educator or may arise incidentally yet the focus remains on meaning and the appropriate use of grammatical forms. (Lightbown and Spada 185-7).

Students' perceptions of grammar and grammar instruction

Wesley postulates that students' perceptions are typically examined from two main viewpoints; how the learner perceives themselves and how they perceive the learning situation both of which have implications on the FLL process (99-100). This study is centred around the learner's perceptions toward the learning situation whereby their opinions and understandings of grammar instruction employed at their university are investigated. The researcher was unable to source studies that specifically investigated Spanish university student's perception of grammar as a foreign language; however other studies were examined since grammar is somewhat universal.

Hahn's study conducted amongst Korean University EFL students revealed that students saw formal grammar instruction as an essential component to the mastery of English and wanted grammar to be taught explicitly. They also agreed that frequent practice of grammar structures ought to be included within communicative activities in order to attain proficiency. Upon analysis of the results of his study in comparison to the demands of the English language curriculum in Korean high schools, Hahn established that within the university context, there was a greater need

to attain grammatical knowledge through focus on form due to the pressure exerted by proficiency measure scales (34). Similar results were yielded in Sogutlu and Otrosi's study despite the target group consisting of Albanian EFL high school students. Generally, the participants held positive views about the role of grammar as a vital component to the mastery of English and they also believed that practice activities that mirrored real-life communication were necessary. They found explicit grammar instruction to be helpful (63).

The desire for explicit instruction in the aforementioned study prompted Sogutlu and Otrosi to further investigate the preferences of Moldovan high school students for integrated and isolated FFI via the implementation of a questionnaire designed by Lightbown and Spada. It was determined that more students opted for integrated FFI which encouraged momentaneous corrections and grammatical explanations of the structures learnt during communicative activities (7-8). Moreover, Schulz's cross-cultural study on students' and teachers' perceptions concerning the role of grammar instruction unveiled the overall alignment of positive views expressed by both groups of Colombian and American students and teachers. The students indicated that the explicit study of grammar occupies an important role in FLL and is necessary for the eventual mastery of the language. They also outlined that this instructional method allowed them to be more conscious of using grammar in writing. The teachers shared similar opinions that explicit grammar instruction is effective in FLL (254).

The studies presented above demonstrate a definite preference for the explicit and separate instruction of grammar in FLL. The researcher observed an apparent gap in the literature as it relates to studies that examine the perceptions of Spanish students about learning grammar separately especially in the context of pursuing a Spanish degree. Nonetheless, the researcher

acknowledges that there may be existing research that was simply not accessed. Resultantly, this study can add to the existing literature.

CHAPTER TWO: FINDINGS

This chapter serves to present the data retrieved from the questionnaires administered in this study which received a total of seventeen responses. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended and closed-ended questions which sought to ascertain students' perceptions of the role of grammar, of learning Spanish grammar separately in the BA Spanish programme at UWI and their preferred method of grammar instruction for these courses. From the data received, the researcher chose to classify the students' responses in accordance with five identifiable categories, excluding demographic data. These categories include students' definitions of grammar, students' perceptions about the role of grammar in FLL, students' perceptions about learning grammar as a separate component of the BA Spanish programme, students' perceptions about the efficacy of this method of grammar instruction and students' preferred method of grammar instruction.

Demographic Data

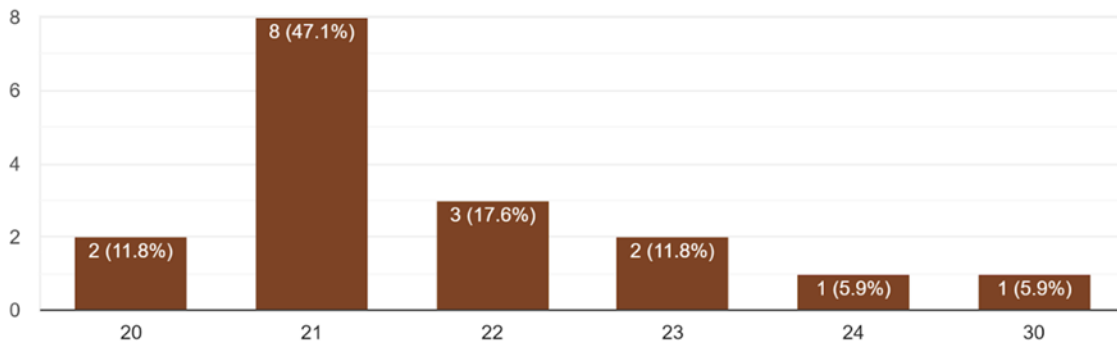


Fig. 1. Bar Chart illustrating the respondents' ages.

The demographic data revealed that 100% of the respondents were female (n= 17), which was to be expected given that the sample group consisted of only one male. The ages ranged from 20-30 years old with the majority being 21 (see Fig.1).

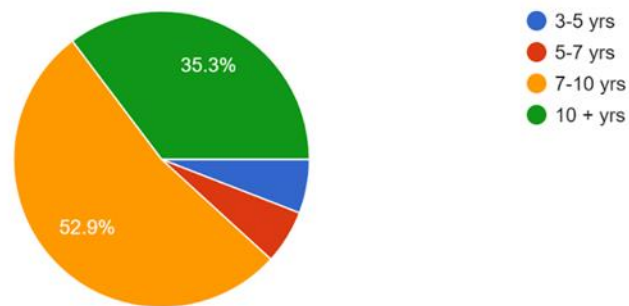


Fig. 2. Pie chart demonstrating the length of time the participants have been studying Spanish.

In response to the length of time the students have been studying Spanish, the majority have been studying Spanish for the past 7-10 years (52.9%). The other responses were quite varied with 35.3% studying for more than 10 years, followed by 1 respondent who had been studying Spanish for 3-5 years (5.9%) and another for 5-7 years (5.9%) (see Fig.2).

Students' Definition of Grammar

Question four elicited the respondents' definitions of grammar. Similarities could be observed which led the researcher to divide the definitions into four themes in alignment with the theory. The themes are prescriptive, traditional, structural and functional definitions. One response was categorized as 'other' since it did not pertain to the previous categories. The responses are outlined as follows.

Theme 1: Prescriptive or Normative Definitions (6/17, 35.3%)

The participants whose definitions exhibited prescriptivist views of grammar referenced the grammatical rules of language and emphasized a “correct” or “proper” form reliant upon the use of ‘accurate’ grammatical rules as evidenced by some of the answers below:

“Rules applied when forming a proper or complete sentence.” (Student 16)

“The syntactical rules that govern the correct or standard use of the language.” (Student 1)

“The structures necessary for accurate use of the language.” (Student 14)

Additionally, two of the responses made specific reference to the written modality:

“Accepted rules related mainly to written communication.” (Student 10)

“The structures used in formal language (writing more than conversation) [...]” (Student 5)

Theme 2: Traditional Definitions (2/17, 11.8%)

Two participants held traditional views of grammar whereby mention was made of parts of speech of language and the rules that govern their combination, as illustrated in their responses:

“Grammar refers to the structure of sentences in a language and how verbs, adverbs, adjectives etc. are used.” (Student 13)

“The use of verbs and the way it may vary in certain situations.” (Student 7)

Theme 3: Structural Definitions (6/17, 35.3%)

The participants that conveyed structuralist attitudes toward grammar, often alluded to the combination of grammatical structures and inversely, the role of grammar as a description of those structures. This is evident in the following definitions:

“The structure of verbs and the basic syntax of a sentence.” (Student 4)

“It is the analysis and breakdown of structures and rules in the language.” (Student 12)

“The learning of various concepts that applies to the structure and formulation of the language.”
(Student 11)

Theme 4: Functional Definitions (2/17, 11.8%)

Functionalist definitions related grammar to communication and functionality as illustrated below:

“Grammar simply enables the language we are learning to make sense. It is essential to the coherent delivery and use of the language.” (Student 17)

“[...] grammar is known as a vital component as it introduces grammatical rules and concepts to learners and teaches them how to effectively communicate with one another [...]” (Student 9)

Theme 5: Other (1/17, 5.9%)

The following definition did not correspond to any of the previous themes above:

“The intricacies of the language that the natives don’t care about” (Student 2)

Student's perceptions of the role of grammar in FLL

The questions in this category were intended to gather students' perceptions about the role of grammar in FLL generally.

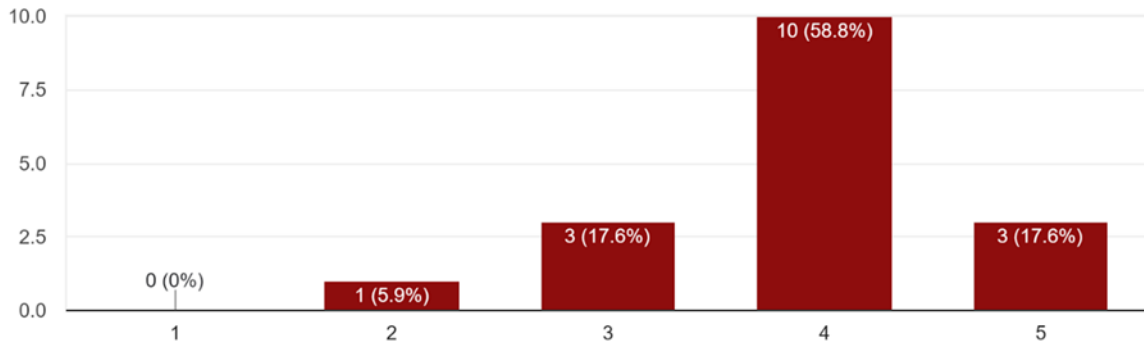


Fig.3. Bar graph displaying the importance of attending grammar class.

In question five, participants were asked to rate how important it was to attend Spanish grammar class on a scale of 1-5, with 1 representing extremely unimportant and 5 being extremely important. No one perceived grammar classes as extremely unimportant whereas the majority, 58.8%, considered it to be important. 17.6% regarded it as extremely important and another 17.6% viewed it as moderately important. Finally, 5.9% considered it to be unimportant (See Fig.3).

Additionally, given the students' complete agreement in question six, it can be inferred grammar is seen as important. Accordingly, 52.9% expressed strong agreement while 47.1% expressed agreement for the requirement of learning and mastering grammar so as to become a proficient user of Spanish.

Conversely, when asked specifically about the Speaking component in question seven, the majority of respondents, 64.7%, stated that they do not consciously think of grammatical rules when speaking Spanish whereas 35.3% affirmed that they do.

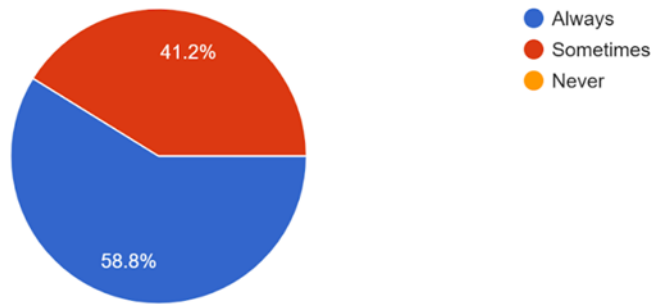


Fig.4 Pie Chart showing the importance of grammatical accuracy to the student when using Spanish.

Question eight required the respondents to indicate whether grammatical correctness was an important factor when using Spanish, to which the majority, 58.8% responded with “always” while 41.2% indicated “sometimes” as denoted in Fig.4.

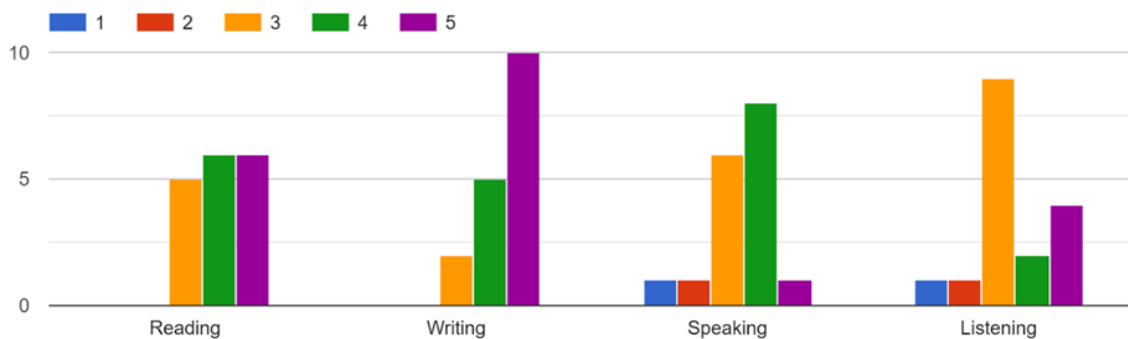


Fig.5. Line graph displaying participants' views of the necessity of correct grammar in each of the language domains.

Subsequently, in question nine, the respondents were required to rate how necessary correct grammar was in each language domain. 1 represented extremely unnecessary while 5 represented extremely necessary. The responses for the reading skill were fairly similar, with the rates of 4 and 5 being selected by 35.3%. Additionally, the majority of the respondents, 58.9%, rated writing as 5, followed by speaking which received a 4 rating by 47.1% of the respondents. The speaking and listening components were the only ones in which correct grammar was rated 1 and 2 by one respondent each (see Fig.5.).

Students perceptions about learning grammar as a separate component of the BA Spanish programme

This category entails questions which assess students' perceptions of learning Spanish grammar as a separate component of the BA Spanish programme.

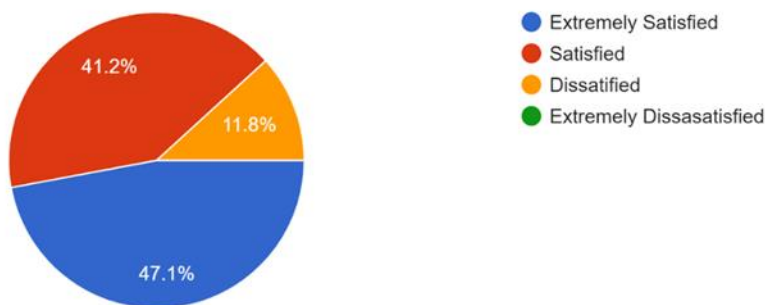


Fig.6. Pie Chart illustrating student satisfaction with grammar sessions being taught separately in the Spanish courses.

The results of question ten reflected students' satisfaction with grammar sessions being taught separately. The majority of participants were extremely satisfied (47.1%), followed by the second largest percent (41.2%) being satisfied, leaving the minority (11.8%) dissatisfied.

Moreover, question eleven requested justification of their response to question 10, which are presented below:

Extremely Satisfied (47.1%)

The researcher detected similarities in the responses that expressed extreme satisfaction with segregated grammar teaching. Participants indicated that Spanish grammar was best taught separately given its 'complex' and 'heavy' nature. Many stated that the attention given to Spanish grammar as its own subject rather than intertwined with the other language skills, allowed for clearer understanding, aided in strengthening overall language competence and avoided confusion. Some responses are presented below:

“I think it would be confusing if my lecturers attempted to teach me advanced grammar structures alongside listening exercises or reading comprehension exercises [...]” (Student 5)

“It helps to have it dealt with separately and strengthens language competence overall.” (Student 10)

“As it needs its own time and identity as such an important and heavy component.” (Student 12)

Satisfied (41.22%)

Students who were satisfied shared corresponding views in their responses. A couple of students alluded to the benefit of separate classes since “advanced” and “complex” grammar was

being taught. This enabled students to thoroughly understand the concepts, effectively use it for communication and apply those concepts in all language domains. One student stated that teaching grammar separately ensured that questions were addressed. This is evident in the following responses:

“It is the only component that makes me feel as though I’m learning ‘advanced’ Spanish.”

(Student 2)

“I think it is important to have an understanding of complex grammatical rules to communicate more effectively and professionally with natives throughout the world.” (Student 3)

“Enough is taught and questions are answered.” (Student 7)

“Learning Spanish grammar helps to strengthen my performance in all components of Spanish such as reading, conversation and listening [...]” (Student 15)

Dissatisfied (11.8%)

Two students indicated dissatisfaction with learning Spanish grammar separately. Both asserted that this was somewhat ineffective since the content was not easily transferable to conversation and writing and was not relevant to the “practical use of language”. One even stated that this method “over complicated” the language. Their views are shown below:

“I believe grammar should be more integrated into other aspects of the language, as grammar doesn’t exist in a bubble and grammar theory doesn’t truly help to understand how to apply grammar effectively in conversation and writing.” (Student 1)

“Learning grammar as a separate component overcomplicates the language for me [...] Beyond that, the topics that we are doing for grammar are not even pertinent to the practical use of the language.” (Student 17)

Furthermore, in question twelve, the participants were asked whether teaching grammar separately, was referred to as explicit or implicit grammar instruction or if they were unaware. It was observed that 47.1% considered it to be explicit instruction while an equal percentage of students were unsure. The minority, 5.9%, believed that this type of grammar instruction was implicit.

Question thirteen required students to describe the Spanish grammar component using one adjective. The researcher encountered a plethora of adjectives which included “Brain taxing”, “Crucial”, “Intricate”, “Tedious”, “Exhausting”, “Vital”, “Essential”, “Pointless” and “Tiresome”. All of those adjectives were employed by one person each. The adjective “Helpful” was utilized by 2 persons and finally “Useful” and “Vital” were indicated by 3 persons each.

Question fourteen asked students to select the option that best described the proceedings of a typical Spanish grammar class. They were presented with 4 options. Option 1; “A grammatical rule or concept being introduced, followed by practice”, Option 2; “Grammatical rules/concepts are contextualized within a natural conversation by the teacher and students. The teacher then draws students’ attention to the grammatical structures used by asking the students questions. Ultimately, the teacher arrives at the formulation of the grammatical rule and helps the student to define the grammatical structure,” Option 3; “A new grammatical structure is introduced in every grammar class without establishing a connection to the previous grammar structure taught” and Option 4; “Grammatical rules are taught in isolation, without reference of how it should be used

in the right context in real time operations.” The majority of the students, 58.8%, selected option two while 41.2% chose option 1.

Moreover, the results for question fifteen revealed that the majority do not think that too much emphasis is placed on grammar in the Spanish program. Nonetheless, 29.4% of the participants affirmed that too much emphasis is allotted to grammar.

Question sixteen sought to obtain students’ views of their overall experience learning grammar separately. The respondents were given four statements to select from which included; Option 1- “I have mastered grammatical structures that I am confident using in the right context, in all four language domains, in both spontaneous and planned interaction”, Option 2- “While I am able to understand and use grammatical structures during practice in grammar class, it is difficult for me to employ these structures when using Spanish in real time interaction,” Option 3- “Grammar instruction should continue to be taught as a separate component so that students can clearly understand complex grammatical rules and structures” and Option 4- “Although grammar is an important part of foreign language learning, the manner in which it is taught is not important to me.” Students were allowed to select more than one option. Option 2 was chosen by a large majority (88.2%), followed by option 3 which was selected by 41.2% and leaving option 4 with 17.6%.

Students perceptions about the efficacy of this method of grammar instruction

Penultimately, this grouping consists of questions that investigate students’ perceptions about the efficacy of delivering grammar instruction separately.

In question seventeen, the respondents were asked if they felt confident that at the end of the semester, new grammatical concepts were conceptualized and they were able to use them

appropriately when communicating in Spanish. A significant number of persons agreed, 64.7%, while 17.6% strongly agreed. Opposingly, 17.6% disagreed.

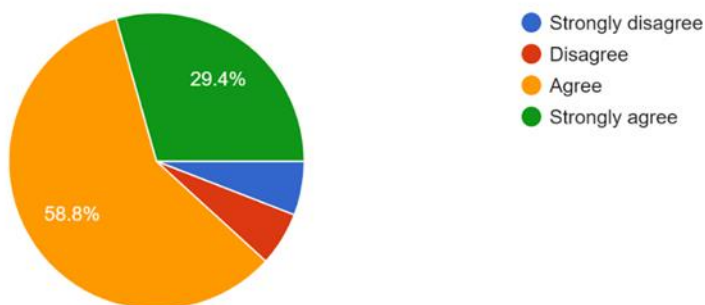


Fig.7. Pie Chart revealing students' perceptions about whether teaching grammar separately has increased their grammatical competence.

In response to question eighteen, the researcher encountered varying responses. When asked if teaching grammar as a separate component has increased their grammatical competence as grammar rules are clearly taught and pointed out, 58.8% of the respondents agreed while 29.4% strongly agreed. Strong disagreement was conveyed by 5.9% and 5.9% of the respondents disagreed (see Fig.7).

The results of question nineteen were roughly divided into positive and negative reactions to the statement; "Since grammar is taught separately, it is difficult for me to utilize or transfer the structures learnt in class in all language domains (Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking)." 41.2% of the participants agreed while 11.8% strongly agreed as opposed to 41.2% who disagreed and the remaining 5.9% accounted for those who strongly disagreed.

Question twenty enquired specifically about the writing skill. It was observed that the majority of respondents, 52.9%, agreed while 35.3% strongly agreed that it was easier to utilize

Spanish grammar rules learnt in writing since they have time to plan and correct sentences. Contrastingly, 11.8% disagreed.

Students' perception about their preferred method of grammar instruction in the BA Spanish programme

Ultimately, the final section solicited students' preferred method of grammar instruction.

Question twenty-one required the respondents' reaction to the statement, "Grammatical rules should not be taught in isolation, rather they should be taught in conversations and readings." It was revealed that 41.2% strongly agreed and 17.6% agreed. On the other hand, 17.6% expressed their disagreement.

Lastly, upon questioning how students would like Spanish grammar to be taught in question twenty-two, the following responses were recorded under the following themes: "Isolated Instruction", "Integrated Instruction" and "Practice Activities."

Theme 1: Isolated Instruction (8/17, 47%)

The majority of the participants opted for the grammar component to be taught separately. This is illustrated in the following responses:

"I agree with the current format of the current grammar classes. I think that grammar should continue to be taught as a separate component." (Student 15)

"I like that grammar is taught separately now." (Student 13)

Notably, although students preferred isolated grammar instruction, some called for greater interrelatedness with other language skills.

Theme 2: Integrated Instruction (5/17, 29.5%)

The responses encompassed in this theme reflects the desire for a more integrated approach to grammar instruction. Reference was made to learning grammar alongside the conversation, listening and writing components. This is evident in some of the responses below:

“It should be done in conjunction with conversation, listening and writing. Immersion is the most important aspect of our language learning journey at this stage of our degree.” (Student 17)

“I would like the Spanish grammatical structures to be integrated in our conversation classes. For example, when we are speaking in class, the lecturer can teach grammatical rules and then highlight or introduce them to us. In this way the lecturer would teach us how to utilize them in real time scenarios.” (Student 9)

Theme 3: Practice Activities (4/17, 23.5%)

The final category appealed for the inclusion of more and/or varied practice activities which emulate the practical use of language in real life. This is exemplified in the responses below:

“Including more activities that allow us to practice applying what we've learnt in real time situations.” (Student 11)

“I think a lot of fun activities such as games and videos would help me a lot.” (Student 16)

CHAPTER THREE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This chapter aims to analyse the findings solicited from this study which were outlined in the previous chapter. In order to answer the research questions posed in the introduction, this chapter will interpret the main findings from the questionnaire administered as well as contextualize it within existing literature.

Although not directly linked to the research questions, the definitions of grammar aid in understanding the student's general perceptions. The findings revealed that students have varying definitions of grammar. The majority viewed it through prescriptivist and structuralist perspectives. The prescriptivist responses alluded to a proper form of the language as is supported by the definition of Depraetere and Langford (2). Notably, specific mention was made of the written component, emphasizing the importance of grammar in writing specifically. This coincides with Saaristo's findings where students' prescriptivist responses stressed the importance of grammar in writing. The structuralist views referred to the structure and combination of grammatical components. Although a large number of responses exhibited structuralist attitudes, it does not reflect the majority as in Saaristo's study. Only two students displayed a traditional view of grammar, referencing the parts of speech while another two held functionalist perspectives which considered the role of grammar when using language for communication. Altogether, the majority of respondents held conventional views of grammar despite the overarching insistence of functionalism and CLT approaches in contemporary FLL. This supports Cook's position that traditional learning approaches may still be relevant in some modern FLL classrooms. Student two gave a definition of grammar that did relate to the views considered but was not dismissed by the researcher. It is possible that the student may not be aware of implicit and explicit knowledge

however implicit knowledge of grammar was suggested in this response as described by Scheffler and Cinciala (13).

The first research question sought to investigate students' perceptions of the role of grammar. Generally, it can be inferred that the respondents perceive grammar positively. The majority saw it necessary to attend grammar classes therefore allocating significance to grammar knowledge. This is reiterated in the total agreement that becoming a proficient user of Spanish depended on the mastery of grammar. While most strongly agreed, the others agreed which suggests that despite believing that the mastery of grammar is integral in fostering a proficient user, it is not the sole element. Additionally, grammatical correctness was considered to be an important factor always when using Spanish by the majority while the remainder indicated 'sometimes.' 'Never' was not selected which emphasizes the undeniable importance of grammar to varying degrees. More specifically, grammatical accuracy was held in high regard in the writing domain as the majority viewed it as extremely necessary whereas it was least necessary for the listening and speaking components. Accordingly, it can be inferred that grammar rules were not consciously thought of when speaking. Despite the modern view postulated by Richards that grammar is no longer highly regarded in contemporary FLL classrooms, the students still consider grammar to be of great importance in learning Spanish. These results align with the findings of Hahn's and Schulz's study where students viewed grammar positively and believed that the mastery of it was essential for EFL learning. Similar positive views were demonstrated in both of Sogutlu and Otrosi's studies despite being conducted in high schools.

The second research question addresses students' perceptions of learning grammar as a separate component. Predominantly, the respondents were satisfied with grammar being taught separately. Those who expressed extreme satisfaction, noted that the "complex" and "heavy"

nature of grammar warranted its separation from other components to facilitate clearer understanding. Those who agreed held similar views since “advanced” grammar was being learnt. This gives the impression that the level of proficiency required and the level of grammar being learnt will dictate how the grammar should be taught hence why ‘strongly agreed’ was not selected. Some also stated that learning grammar separately enabled them to transfer grammar knowledge to all other language domains. This is contradictory as the majority of respondents indicated that grammar rules were not consciously thought of when speaking Spanish. Nonetheless, the couple that were dissatisfied stated that the grammar knowledge learnt in separate sessions was not easily transferable to other language skills, did not replicate practical language use and even over complicated the language.

Several students described this type of grammar instruction as explicit instruction whereas equal amounts were unsure. From the secondary data, this method is referred to as explicit grammar instruction as illustrated by Ellis (16). Furthermore, the respondents perceived the grammar component mostly positively describing it as “helpful”, “vital” and “useful” however some stated negative opinions such as “tiresome”, “brain-taxing” and “tedious.” The researcher deduced that this view may not suggest that students disliked grammar classes but that grammar constituted cumbersome yet necessary content. This is supported by the fact that they generally believe that not too much emphasis is placed on grammar in the Spanish programme. The proceedings of a typical grammar as indicated by the students, is classified as isolated FFI as depicted by Lightbown and Spada. That is, grammatical rules are clearly highlighted after the communicative activity.

Moreover, the students agreed that it was difficult to use the grammar structures learnt in class in real time interaction. This view is elucidated by Ling whereby explicit grammar

instruction does not yield overall communicative competence rather it develops grammatical competence. Contrastingly, the respondents agreed that grammar classes should continue to be taught separately. This signifies that the respondents do not necessarily fault the instruction method for this difficulty which may be resolved in other ways. This accounts for the student's overall agreement with the efficacy of teaching grammar as a separate component and its positive impact on grammatical competence. The students did not strongly agree, possibly because while segregated teaching aids in understanding grammatical concepts, it did not entirely realize the functionality of language. The findings illustrated that although students encounter difficulty in employing grammar rules that are taught separately in the other language domains, agreeably it was easiest to use the rules in the written component. This attests to the efficacy of explicit grammar instruction particularly in writing and the subsequent oversight of spontaneous and real time language production, a skill which is typically associated with implicit knowledge as Scheffler and Cinciala assert.

The final research question ascertained the student's preferred method of grammar instruction for this specific programme. Generally, explicit, isolated instruction was preferred, however, some students called for more correlation amongst all language components. It can be concluded that grammar should be taught separately so that grammar rules are understood clearly but it should also be brought into context in the other language components so that students understand how to use the rules appropriately. Previous studies yielded similar results such as those of Hahn and Schulz. Students and teachers in the case of Schulz's study, opted for explicit grammar instruction and desired more communicative practice activities. Moreover, in this study, some favoured an integrated grammar approach, with grammar being taught within other components. Overall, it can be determined that the respondents demand integrated FFI where

grammar is taught explicitly, during communicative activities which coincides with the findings of Sogutlu and Otrosi's study. Other respondents requested the inclusion of more practice activities especially those that mimic real time use of the language which reflects the views of Celce-Murcia as she advocates for communicative-based syllabi. The researcher assumed that these students were satisfied with the grammar component being taught separately but wanted more practice activities since it was not directly stated.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to determine students' perceptions about learning grammar as a separate component of the Spanish courses in the BA Spanish programme at UWI St. Augustine. With the purposes of answering the three proposed research questions; “What is the role of grammar in the foreign language learning process, according to the students?”, “How do students perceive learning grammar as an individual component of the Spanish courses in the BA Spanish programme at UWI, St. Augustine?” and “What are the students’ preferred methods of grammar instruction for the Spanish courses they are pursuing?”, both primary and secondary data collection methods were employed.

Overall, despite minor contradictions, the findings collected and interpreted, concludes that the students view grammar positively and consider it to be important in the FLL process. They are content with the grammar component being taught separately in the BA Spanish programme at UWI and request the inclusion of more practice activities that aid in the production of spontaneous and accurate language production in real-life scenarios. Nonetheless, they prefer explicit, integrated FFI and desire increased interconnectedness of grammar and other language components as opposed to the explicit, isolated FFI being currently encountered.

The findings of this study aids in expanding the field of foreign language learning and teaching by providing data from an insufficiently researched context.

Limitations

Some limitations identified by the researcher include the small sample population which only consisted of year three students in UWI as well as the unintentional data collection from one

gender. This is due to the fact that males are not typically abundant in FLL classrooms and the one that was, chose not to participate. Additionally, there was limited access to data that fit into the specific context of this current study while no relevant research could be sourced from Caribbean perspectives.

Recommendations

Ideally, the sample size of the study should have been larger and more varied which can be addressed in future studies which may even seek to explore student perceptions in various institutions across the Caribbean. Evidently research from the Caribbean in the FLL field is limited therefore additional research is highly recommended. Internationally, investigation into Spanish grammar especially should be conducted and greater focus should be placed on the student's perspective

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APPENDIX A

Sample Questionnaire

Dear participant,

My name is Sandhya John and I am currently conducting research for my undergraduate HUMN 3099, Caribbean Studies project which you may be familiar with. My project is entitled “A case study of students’ perceptions about learning grammar as a separate component of the Spanish courses in the BA Spanish programme at UWI St. Augustine.” As a result, this questionnaire seeks to gather data regarding your perceptions about learning grammar separately. It is intended for year three, undergraduate students who are currently pursuing a degree in Spanish. Therefore, if you are eligible, your participation would be truly valuable for the realization of this study. The questionnaire will take you approximately 15 minutes (maximum) and your responses will be anonymous. Thank you in advance for your willingness and sincere contributions, it is greatly appreciated.

Demographics

1) Gender: Male Female

2) Age: _____

3) How long have they been studying Spanish?

3-5 yrs 5-7 yrs 7-10 yrs 10+ yrs

Section 1: Defining grammar

4) How do you define the term ‘grammar’ as it relates to foreign language learning and teaching?

Section 2: The role of grammar in the FLL process

5) On a scale of 1-5 (1- not important, 5-extremely important) how important is it for you to attend grammar classes?

1 2 3 4 5

6) Learning and mastering grammar is necessary to become a proficient user of a foreign language.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

7) When speaking Spanish, I am consciously thinking of grammatical rules in my mind.

Yes No

8) It is important to me to be grammatically correct whenever I use Spanish.

Always Sometimes Never

9) How necessary is correct grammar in each of the language skills? (1- extremely unnecessary, 5- extremely necessary).

Reading: 1 2 3 4 5

Writing: 1 2 3 4 5

Speaking: 1 2 3 4 5

Listening: 1 2 3 4 5

Section 3: Learning grammar as an individual component of the BA Spanish programme

10) How satisfied are you that grammar sessions are taught as a separate component in Spanish courses?

Extremely Satisfied Satisfied Dissatisfied Extremely Dissatisfied

11) Please justify your response to the previous question.

12) This method of grammar instruction can be characterized as _____

Explicit grammar instruction Implicit grammar instruction Unaware

13) Write one adjective you would use to best describe the grammar component.

14) From your experience at UWI, which of the following best represents the proceedings of a typical Spanish grammar class:

- A grammatical rule or concept being introduced, followed by practice.
- Grammatical rules/concepts are contextualized within a natural conversation by the teacher and students. The teacher then draws students' attention to the grammatical structures used by asking the students questions. Ultimately, the teacher arrives at the formulation of the grammatical rule and helps the student to define the grammatical structure.
- A new grammatical structure is introduced in every grammar class without establishing a connection to the previous grammar structure taught.
- Grammatical rules are taught in isolation, without reference of how it should be used in the right context in real time operations.

15) I believe that too much emphasis is placed on grammar in the Spanish program.

- Yes No

16) Reflecting on your overall experience so far learning grammar as a separate component, which of the following statements are true:

- I have mastered grammatical structures that I am confident using in the right context, in all four language domains, in both spontaneous and planned interaction.
- While I am able to understand and use grammatical structures during practice in grammar class, it is difficult for me to employ these structures when using Spanish in real time interaction.
- Grammar instruction should continue to be taught as a separate component so that students can clearly understand complex grammatical rules and structures.
- Although grammar is an important part of foreign language learning, the manner in which it is taught is not important to me.

Section 4: The efficacy of this method of grammar instruction

17) At the end of each semester, I feel confident that I have conceptualized some new grammatical concepts taught and can use them appropriately when communicating in Spanish.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

18) Teaching grammar as a separate component has increased my grammatical competence since grammar rules are clearly taught and pointed out to me.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

19) Since grammar is taught separately, it is difficult for me to utilize or transfer the structures learnt in class in all language domains (Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking).

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

20) It is easier for me to utilize the Spanish grammar rules I have learnt in writing since I have more time to think, plan and correct my sentences.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Section 5: Preferred method of grammar instruction

21) Grammatical rules should not be taught in isolation, rather they should be taught in conversations and readings.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

22) How would you like Spanish grammar to be taught in the Spanish courses?
