

## INVESTIGATING THE CHALLENGES IN TEACHING GRAMMAR TO EFL STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY AT HERAT UNIVERSITY, AFGHANISTAN

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**Abstract.** *This study investigates the challenges in teaching grammar to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. More specifically, it focuses on grammar challenges caused by the interference of the students' native languages, teaching strategies and the classroom environment. The research includes 100 EFL students at two different English Departments at Herat University. A questionnaire is adopted to test the challenges in the three different areas. Statistical tests are applied to check if the challenges are perceived to affect by students' grammar skill. The findings show that students' learning is significantly influenced by three key factors: language interference, teaching strategies, and classroom environment. Most students reported challenges with understanding English, emphasized the importance of effective teaching strategies, and noted that classroom conditions impact their focus. Implications on native language and both instructional and environmental improvements are regarded as crucial for enhancing learning outcomes.*

**Keywords:** *EFL students, grammar instruction, language interference, teaching strategies.*

### INTRODUCTION

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students face persistent challenges in acquiring grammatical competence due to various linguistic, pedagogical, and contextual factors (Ellis, 2006; Richards & Renandya, 2002). Grammar, in this context, refers to the system and structure of a language, including syntax, morphology, and the rules that govern sentence formation (Ur, 2012). Mastery of grammar is essential for effective communication and overall language proficiency (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). However, many learners struggle to internalize grammatical rules, particularly due to language interference, teaching methodologies, and the classroom environment (Larsen-Freeman, 2003; Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

One of the main challenges in English grammar acquisition for EFL students is the interference from their native language (Odlin, 1989). This phenomenon, also known as negative transfer, occurs when learners apply grammatical patterns from their first language to English, often leading to errors (Gass & Selinker, 2008). According to Swan (2005), learners frequently overgeneralize or misapply English grammar rules because of their familiarity with their L1 structures.

Odlin (1989) supports this view, explaining that significant structural differences between English and a learner's first language can result in persistent grammatical errors. For instance, Chinese learners often struggle with the use of articles (a/an/the) because their native language lacks equivalents. Similarly, Arabic speakers face challenges with English verb tenses due to differences in aspectual distinctions (Scott & Tucker, 1974). Lado's (1957) contrastive analysis hypothesis suggests that the greater the differences between the two languages, the more difficult it becomes to acquire the target language. Nevertheless, Cook (2008) argues that bilingual learners can develop metalinguistic awareness, enabling them to better manage interference and develop strategies for more accurate language use.

Another significant factor influencing grammar acquisition is the teaching methodology used in the classroom (Ellis, 2006; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Teaching methodology refers to the approach and techniques instructors employ to deliver grammar instruction, which can range from traditional rule-based methods to modern communicative approaches (Krashen, 1982). Krashen also argues that learners benefit more from meaningful input rather than rote memorization of grammar rules. Conversely, Thornbury (1999) emphasizes that explicit instruction is necessary for internalizing complex structures and avoiding fossilization of errors. Richards and Rodgers (2001) compare the grammar-translation method with communicative language teaching (CLT), concluding that CLT promotes long-term retention and meaningful use of grammar. Tahsildar (2014; 2018) highlight the impact of grammatical cohesive devices on both listening and writing production. However, Ur (2012) maintains that direct grammar instruction is crucial, especially in academic contexts where accuracy is important. Celce-Murcia (1991) and Larsen-Freeman (2003) advocate for an integrated approach that combines rule explanation with practical usage, addressing the grammar form, meaning, and use.

In addition to language interference and methodology, the classroom environment plays a vital role in the effectiveness of grammar instruction (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Wang, 2010). Classroom environment includes the physical and psychological setting, teacher expertise, availability of resources, and instructional strategies (Fraser, 2012; Harmer, 2015; Scrivener, 2011). Harmer (2007) emphasizes the role of engaging materials and classroom environment in enhancing learners' motivation and facilitating grammar acquisition. A study by Fraser (2012) found that a supportive and well-structured classroom climate positively correlates with increased student motivation and engagement in language learning tasks. Similarly, Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) emphasized the role of a psychologically safe environment, where learners feel comfortable taking risks, in enhancing communicative competence. Wang (2010) conducted a mixed-methods study in Chinese EFL classrooms and reported that factors such as seating arrangement, access to teaching aids, and classroom aesthetics had measurable effects on students' attentiveness and grammatical performance.

Moreover, Harmer (2015) highlighted that teacher behavior and the strategic use of group work and interaction patterns could foster a more inclusive environment conducive to grammar acquisition. These studies collectively underscore the multifaceted nature of the classroom environment and its critical role in shaping EFL learners' grammatical development.

Thus, the acquisition of English grammar by EFL learners is seen to get influenced by a complex interplay of factors, among which native language interference, teaching methodology, and classroom environment are particularly critical. Negative transfer from the first language often leads to persistent grammatical errors, especially when learners unconsciously apply L1 structures to English. At the same time, the effectiveness of grammar instruction is heavily dependent on the pedagogical approaches employed in the classroom, with research highlighting the value of communicative, form-focused, and learner-centered methods. Equally important is the classroom environment, encompassing both physical and psychological elements, which can either support or hinder language learning. A positive environment—characterized by teacher support, effective resource use, and opportunities for interaction—has been shown to enhance learner motivation and grammatical development. Understanding and addressing these three dimensions holistically is essential for improving grammar acquisition and overall proficiency in EFL contexts.

Despite the growing body of research on the factors influencing EFL grammar acquisition, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning systematic studies within the context of Afghan universities. While international studies have extensively examined the roles of native language interference, teaching methodologies, and classroom environment, limited empirical evidence exists that specifically addresses how these variables affect EFL learners in Afghanistan's higher education institutions. The unique linguistic, educational, and socio-cultural context of Afghan universities necessitates focused investigation to determine whether existing global findings are applicable or if distinct patterns emerge. Therefore, further research in this setting is essential to enrich the literature and inform more contextually relevant pedagogical practices.

Research objectives:

To explore EFL students' native language interference on their grammar skills

To investigate how uses of different teaching strategies affect EFL students' use of English grammar

To examine if classroom environment impacts the effectiveness of grammar instruction to EFL students

Research Questions

How does EFL students' native language interfere their grammar skills?

How does use of different teaching strategies affect the students' use of English grammar?

To what extent does classroom environment influence the effectiveness of grammar instruction to EFL students?

**Materials and Methods:** This study was conducted on 100 EFL students enrolled at two English Departments of Herat University. The participants were selected based on availability and willingness, representing both public university and private institutes. Their native language was Persian. A quantitative research design was employed, using structured questionnaires as the primary data collection tool. The questionnaires were designed to gather data on students' attitudes toward the three challenges with regards to learning English as a foreign language. It was adopted from Richards and Schmidt (2010). The questionnaire validity has been certified in different settings.

The data was analyzed using various statistical techniques to address the study's primary research questions regarding challenges in teaching English grammar to EFL students.

Analyses: First, a Chronbach's Alpha was conducted to check the reliability of the instrument in the current study. The result is shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1

The reliability test

All the aspects	Alpha
	.913
Language interference	.798
Teaching strategies	.747
Classroom environment	.812

A descriptive statistic was also calculated to summarize the central tendencies (mean), variability (standard deviation), and the precision of the sample mean (standard error). This was done for each of the items related to any of the three aspects (language interference, teaching strategies and classroom environment) as per the research questions. The results are below in Tables 2, 3 and 4, respectively.

Table 2 Language Interference Impact (Items 1–6)

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	3%	7%	20%	45%	25%
2	2%	8%	25%	40%	25%
3	4%	12%	20%	38%	26%
4	5%	10%	15%	45%	25%
5	6%	14%	20%	38%	22%
6	3%	10%	22%	40%	25%

The responses indicate that most participants perceive language interference as a significant factor affecting their learning. Across all six items, the majority of students selected "Agree" or "Strongly Agree," suggesting that difficulties such as understanding English vocabulary, sentence structure, or overall communication in the classroom are common. A smaller portion of students expressed neutrality or disagreement, indicating some variability, but overall, language appears to be a prominent barrier for many.

Table 3 Teaching strategies (Items 7–11, 14–15)

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
7	1%	5%	15%	50%	29%
8	2%	8%	20%	45%	25%
9	3%	10%	20%	40%	27%
10	2%	8%	25%	40%	25%
11	1%	5%	20%	49%	25%
14	2%	6%	20%	45%	27%
15	1%	4%	15%	50%	30%

Most respondents agreed that the teaching strategies used by their instructors significantly influence their understanding and engagement in the classroom. High percentages of "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" responses show that students value interactive, clear, and supportive teaching approaches. Few students selected "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree," which reinforces that the majority view teaching strategy as a critical component in their learning process.

Table 4 Classroom Environment (Items 12–13)

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
12	3%	9%	18%	45%	25%
13	2%	6%	17%	50%	25%

The findings suggest that the physical classroom environment—specifically factors like noise, temperature, and lighting—has a notable impact on students' learning. A majority of students responded with "Agree" or "Strongly Agree," indicating that environmental distractions and discomforts can hinder their concentration and understanding. This reflects a need for better classroom conditions to support effective learning.

Another descriptive statistics was applied to summarize the central tendencies (mean), variability (standard deviation), and the precision of the sample mean (standard error). This was done for each of the key survey items related to challenges in teaching English grammar to EFL students. Results are show in Table 5 below:

Table 5

The descriptive statistics for key items in the questionnaire

The aspects	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error M
1: Language interference	100	4.10	0.82	0.082
2: Teaching strategies	100	3.60	0.68	0.068
3: Classroom environment	100	4.05	0.79	0.079

The analysis of the first research question examines the impact of language interference on English grammar learning among EFL students. The mean score of 4.10 indicates that language interference is perceived as a major challenge for the majority of learners. A standard deviation of 0.82 reflects notable variability in responses, suggesting that while many students are affected, the degree of interference varies across individuals. The standard error of the mean (SEM), calculated at 0.082, points to a high level of precision and reliability in estimating the population mean.

The second research question investigates the influence of teaching strategies on student engagement and understanding of English grammar. The mean score of 3.60 suggests that learners held mixed views regarding the effectiveness of different instructional approaches. The standard deviation of 0.68 indicates relatively low variability in responses compared to the first question, suggesting more consistent experiences among students. The corresponding standard error of 0.068 reinforces the reliability of the mean, reflecting a precise estimate.

The third research question focuses on factors such as teacher experience, instructional resources, and classroom environment in shaping the effectiveness of grammar instruction. The mean score of 4.05 demonstrates that learners perceive these contextual factors as having a strong influence on grammar learning.

The standard deviation of 0.79 implies moderate variability in learners' responses, and the standard error of 0.079 indicates a reliable estimation of the mean, lending further credibility to the findings.

Overall, the study highlights several key factors that shape grammar learning for EFL students. Language interference emerges as the most significant obstacle, emphasizing the challenges learners face when their native language structures interfere with English grammar acquisition. Moreover, classroom-related factors—particularly teacher expertise, resource availability, and the learning environment—play a critical role in influencing instructional effectiveness. The variation in perceptions of teaching strategies suggests that different strategies resonate differently with learners, underscoring the need for adaptive and learner-centered instruction. The consistently low standard errors across all three questions further support the statistical reliability of the results. These findings underscore the importance of targeted teaching strategies and supportive learning conditions to effectively address the diverse needs of EFL learners.

### **Findings:**

This study provides valuable insights into the challenges encountered by EFL learners in acquiring English grammar. The descriptive statistical analysis of key survey items identifies three major influencing factors: language interference, teaching strategies, and classroom-related conditions. These results are consistent with existing literature on second language acquisition (Ellis, 2006; Richards & Renandya, 2002).

The analysis of learners' overall challenges in mastering English grammar reveals a mean score of 3.85, indicating that participants generally perceive grammar acquisition as difficult. A standard deviation of 0.75 suggests moderate variability in responses, reflecting individual differences in the level of difficulty experienced. The standard error of 0.075 indicates a reasonable degree of precision in the mean estimate, lending credibility to the findings. These results reinforce previous research highlighting the inherent complexity of second language grammar learning and the importance of individual learner characteristics (Krashen, 1982; Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Language interference emerged as the most prominent challenge, with a mean score of 4.10, suggesting that the influence of learners' native language significantly hinders English grammar learning. The standard deviation of 0.82 indicates substantial variability in learners' experiences with language interference, pointing to differences in linguistic background and cognitive processing. The standard error of 0.082 confirms the reliability of the mean score. This outcome aligns with studies emphasizing the negative transfer of first-language structures to second-language acquisition (Odlin, 1989; Lado, 1957).

Regarding teaching strategies, the mean score of 3.60 reflects a moderate and varied perception among learners about the effectiveness of different instructional strategies.

This suggests that teaching strategies are not uniformly effective and may depend on learners' preferences, needs, and learning styles. The standard deviation of 0.68 demonstrates comparatively lower variability, indicating a relatively consistent pattern in students' experiences.

The standard error of 0.068 reinforces the precision of the mean, supporting the trustworthiness of the result.

These findings correspond with research advocating for the integration of both explicit and implicit grammar instruction to cater to diverse learners (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011; Ellis, 2009).

Classroom-related factors, including teacher qualifications, resource availability, and the overall learning environment, were found to significantly influence grammar instruction outcomes, as reflected in a mean score of 4.05. A standard deviation of 0.79 indicates moderate variability in learners' experiences, suggesting that classroom dynamics benefit some students more than others. The standard error of 0.079 supports the accuracy and reliability of this result.

These findings are supported by prior studies emphasizing the importance of teacher expertise, interactional quality, and instructional resources in shaping second language learning outcomes (Harmer, 2007; Brown, 2001).

### **Discussion:**

This study identifies several critical factors influencing English grammar acquisition among EFL learners, with particular emphasis on the roles of language interference, teaching strategies, and classroom conditions. The notably high mean score for language interference ( $M = 4.10$ ) underscores the persistent and detrimental effect of first-language transfer in second-language grammar learning. This finding aligns with Ellis (2006), who emphasizes the cognitive and structural challenges that L1 interference imposes on L2 acquisition. Similarly, Odlin (1989) and Lado (1957) argue that negative transfer from the native language often results in persistent grammatical errors, particularly in morphosyntactic structures.

Classroom-related factors were also found to significantly affect grammar learning outcomes ( $M = 4.05$ ), highlighting the influence of teacher expertise, access to instructional resources, and the broader learning environment. This result reinforces the sociocultural perspective of language learning, which asserts that learning is mediated through interaction and the quality of instructional input (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Prior studies similarly stress the role of contextual factors in promoting or constraining language development, particularly in environments with limited pedagogical support (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). In this context, teacher qualifications and instructional scaffolding are crucial for effective grammar instruction.

In contrast, the lower mean score for teaching strategies ( $M = 3.60$ ) indicates a more varied perception among learners regarding instructional effectiveness. This variability may reflect the diversity of learner preferences, language backgrounds, and cognitive styles. As Larsen-Freeman (2000) argues, no single strategy or approach guarantees success for all learners; rather, an eclectic and adaptive pedagogy—one that incorporates both form-focused and communicative strategies—is more likely to meet diverse learner needs. The findings also resonate with Nassaji and Fotos (2011), who advocate for an integrated approach that balances explicit instruction with meaningful interaction.

Moreover, the relatively low standard errors (ranging from 0.068 to 0.082) across the variables reflect a moderate to high degree of precision, lending credibility and reliability to the quantitative findings. However, while the descriptive statistics provide useful general trends, they do not capture the nuanced, subjective experiences of individual learners. As Dörnyei (2005) notes, mixed-methods or qualitative investigations are essential to understanding the dynamic interplay of cognitive, emotional, and environmental variables in second language acquisition.

Future studies might benefit from in-depth interviews or classroom observations to explore how learners internalize grammatical rules and how teachers adapt instruction in response to learner needs.

Overall, the study contributes to the growing body of research emphasizing the multifaceted nature of grammar learning in EFL contexts. It highlights the need for learner-centered, context-responsive instructional strategies, and stresses the importance of mitigating language interference through contrastive analysis and tailored feedback. In doing so, it underscores the pedagogical imperative to consider not only what is taught, but how and under what conditions it is delivered.

### **Conclusion**

This study finds that the main challenges in EFL grammar acquisition stem from first-language interference, the complexity of English grammar, and inconsistent instructional methods. Learners struggle with negative L1 transfer, limited exposure to authentic language, and traditional memorization-based teaching, which often fails to support communicative competence (Krashen, 1982; Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

In contrast, communicative and context-rich approaches better foster comprehension, learner autonomy, and active engagement, aligning with sociocultural and interactionist theories (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Yet balancing accuracy and fluency remains difficult in diverse classrooms with varied learner needs and institutional constraints.

Modern strategies such as technology-enhanced instruction, task-based learning, and interactive exercises show promise for improving grammar acquisition and motivation when effectively implemented (Ellis, 2009; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011).

However, study limitations—such as participants' prior grammar exposure, the cross-sectional design, and a narrow sample—restrict generalizability and call for future research with more robust methods. Future investigations should use advanced statistics, for example:

Native language interference: Linear regression on Likert-scale interference ratings and grammar test scores can reveal predictive relationships.

Teaching methods: ANOVA or multiple regression with dummy coding can assess differences across instructional approaches while controlling for motivation and class dynamics.

Classroom environment: Regression analysis on continuous measures can clarify its impact on grammar outcomes.

These findings have key educational implications: the strong influence of L1 interference underscores the need for support programs or bilingual instruction; the role of teaching methods highlights the value of teacher training in interactive strategies; and the classroom environment's impact suggests improving physical conditions can enhance learning.

Future research should adopt mixed-methods and longitudinal designs to better capture learner experiences and long-term instructional effects, offering actionable insights for curriculum developers, teachers, and policymakers.

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