

# Exploring Learners' Beliefs on Grammar Learning: Importance and Preferred Methods

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**Abstract**—Learners' beliefs are considered an essential factor that impacts foreign or second language learning. Moreover, learners' beliefs about the importance of grammar learning and grammar learning approaches are involved in an ongoing debate in applied linguistics. Therefore, the present study investigated learners' beliefs about the importance of grammar learning, how learners prefer to learn grammar (explicitly or implicitly), and why. 172 Saudi male EFL college students completed a survey. Among them, 24 students participated in four focus-group interviews. The quantitative data from the survey were collected, and the emerging themes from the qualitative data were determined. The findings show that grammar learning is important or very important to most learners. Around two-thirds of the learners preferred learning grammar explicitly, whereas around one-third preferred implicit grammar learning. Learners reported different beliefs about their preferences for grammar learning approaches.

**Index Terms**—learners' beliefs, grammar learning, grammar instruction, EFL context

## I. INTRODUCTION

Learners' beliefs are considered one of the most essential individual differences variables outlined by Dörnyei (2005). Their importance is attributed to their significant impact on the learners' behaviors (Horwitz, 1988). They are strongly linked to two essential learning elements: process and product (Ellis, 2008). Schulz (2001) indicated the importance of learners' beliefs because "FL [Foreign Language] educators need to keep these beliefs or perceptions in mind when planning classroom activities, given that teaching activities need to be perceived in the learners' minds as conducive to learning" (p. 245).

The foreign or second language (L2) grammar teaching-learning process is interwoven and firmly connected. Grammar learning is highly interrelated to grammar teaching, and grammar teaching cannot be isolated from grammar learning. This is obvious since both processes (teaching and learning) share similar approaches, such as being explicit or implicit (Oxford et al., 2007). Grammar learning is essential in L2 learning, particularly for adult language learners. In situ, the importance of grammar learning predicates its longstanding efficacy in communication. Learning another language means learning a lot of grammatical rules (Horwitz, 1988). Thus, knowledge of grammar is essential since it enables language learners to communicate "accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately" (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 255).

Due to their cognitive styles, L2 learners have different preferences in their L2 learning (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2009). In particular, they have specific preferences while learning L2 grammar. Some learners prefer learning grammar explicitly, while others prefer learning grammar implicitly (Celce-Murcia, 1991; DeKeyser, 1994; Hulstijn, 2005; Larsen-Freeman, 2001). In implicit grammar learning, learners do not pay any attention to form, and there is no grammar rule explanation; however, in explicit grammar learning, learners pay attention to target structures, and there is a kind of awareness toward form (Oxford et al., 2007).

The present study aims to identify learners' beliefs about the importance of grammar learning to them. On the other hand, it intends to explore their beliefs about how they prefer to learn grammar and why. Although there are very few studies that discussed learners' beliefs about learning grammar in the Saudi context, there is still a need for more studies to have a better understanding of how grammar is supposed to be instructed in this context and learn more about the beliefs and perceptions of learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) toward grammar in Saudi Arabia. The study attempts to hear learners' voices regarding to what extent grammar learning is important from their perspectives; it also investigates why they prefer to learn grammar explicitly or implicitly.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Belief Definition

Learners' beliefs have witnessed increased focus by some researchers such as Horwitz (1987), Ellis (2008), Kalaja and Barcelos (2003), and Mercer (2011). It has been found that learners' beliefs play a pivotal role in interpreting learners' experiences, directing learners' behaviors, and managing their learning (Wenden, 1999). According to Horwitz (1999), "Learner beliefs have the potential to influence both their experiences and actions as language learners" (p. 558). Learners' beliefs enable us to understand the world and determine how we think and act (Puchta, 1999).

Although researchers faced many difficulties in defining learners' beliefs (Barcelos, 2003; Mercer, 2011), there were some attempts to do so. One of the early definitions was by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), who defined the concept of belief as "the subjective probability of a relation between the object of the belief and some other object, value, concept, or attribute" (p. 131). Later, Ajzen (2005) stated that learners form "beliefs about an object by associating it with certain attributes" (p. 131). Kalajia and Barcelos (2003) defined language learning beliefs as "opinions and ideas that learners (and teachers) have about the task of learning a second/foreign language" (p. 1). They revisited the topic in 2011 and looked at some characteristics of learners' beliefs and considered learners' beliefs to be: 1- fluctuating, 2- complex and dialectical, 3- related to the micro- and macro-political contexts and discourses, 4- intrinsically related to other affective constructs such as emotions and self-concepts, 5- other-oriented, 6- influenced by reflection and affordances, 7- related to knowledge in intricate ways, and 8- related to action in complex ways (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011, pp. 285-286).

Horwitz (1987) developed the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), which included five areas of beliefs in language learning: foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivations and expectations. Although some researchers have designed other inventories for language learning beliefs, such as Kuntz (1996), BALLI is considered the most used inventory to measure language learning beliefs. The present study explores learners' beliefs about the importance of learning grammar and their preferences for grammar learning methods, which were not included in BALLI. Thus, it was not employed in the present study.

### *B. Studies About Learners' Beliefs*

According to Ellis (2008), learners' beliefs can be investigated in four approaches:

1. The normative approach in which learners' beliefs are explored through survey, such as Horwitz's (1987) BALLI
2. The metacognitive approach through which learners' beliefs can be discovered through the content analysis of semi-structured interviews
3. The contextual approach in which various types of data can be collected and analyzed using different means
4. The metaphor analysis is where learners' metaphors are analyzed to describe their language learning and identify their learning beliefs.

Learners' beliefs studies should be viewed within the scope of vital issues related to the context of L2 learning and teaching, such as complexity, dynamicity, and context-dependency (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011). Therefore, various learners' beliefs studies from international and Saudi contexts using different approaches to identify learners' beliefs will be reviewed in this section.

Around two decades ago, Tanaka (2004) investigated belief changes and the relationship between learners' beliefs and the English proficiency of 56 Japanese students learning English in New Zealand for 12 weeks. The quantitative and qualitative results showed notable changes in students' beliefs. Although the findings showed students' awareness of the importance of analytical learning, particularly the importance of learning grammar and vocabulary to improve their communicative competence in English, there was no improvement in students' grammar when they spoke in English.

In another study, Loewen et al. (2009) investigated the learners' beliefs regarding the role of grammar instruction and grammar error correction among 754 American university students studying different L2 in the US who completed a questionnaire and four open-ended prompts. The quantitative findings showed that although most students believed in the importance of grammar instruction, they were not equal in valuing it. Learning grammar enabled many students to improve their language ability, and students' language backgrounds provided different beliefs about grammar instruction.

Another study we should look at is Jean and Simard (2011), which targeted 2321 Canadian high school students regarding their beliefs about L2 grammar instruction. A questionnaire consisting of five parts, including language competence, importance of grammatical accuracy, receptivity to grammar instruction, receptivity to specific types of grammar instruction, and receptivity to corrective feedback, was employed to collect data. The findings showed that grammar instruction was "important" or "very important" and valuable for accurate spoken and written production. The results also showed that grammar instruction was beneficial, particularly regarding error correction. Although students' beliefs were generally positive regarding the importance and effectiveness of grammar instruction, the results showed that students did not enjoy grammar instruction, and it was boring for some other learners.

In another context, Sogutlu (2016) conducted a study exploring EFL learners' beliefs about grammar knowledge roles and teaching methods. 925 Albanian 10th-grade high school students completed an 18-item questionnaire. The results showed that the importance of grammar instruction was high. Explicit grammar learning (deductive) was reported to have the highest mean score, and inductive grammar learning was reported to have the lowest mean score.

Again, in Canada, Almazloun (2018) explored learners' beliefs about grammar learning in an English for Academic Purposes program at a Canadian university. Eight non-native speakers of English undergraduate students were involved in semi-structured interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and essay writing. The results of this study showed that grammar is very important for learning language in general, speaking and comprehension, and writing. The students' insights about grammar included seeing grammar as a syntactical tool, interactional tool, rhetorical tool, and language system.

Daloglu (2020) explored learners' beliefs about the best way of learning grammar, focusing on explicit and implicit grammar learning methods, including their underlying Focus on Form and Focus on Meaning methods. A survey of 26

items plus one open-ended item was distributed among 927 Turkish preparatory year university students in different English proficiency levels. The findings indicated that participants preferred implicit grammar learning and changed their beliefs about grammar learning during their undergraduate education. Although explicit grammar learning was reported as the least preferred method, participants chose it between implicit and explicit grammar learning methods.

In the Saudi context, Al-Malki and Javid (2018) conducted a study to explore Saudi EFL university students' beliefs about their language learning using Horwitz's (1987) BALLI. The findings showed high English learning aptitude, emphasizing learning English in childhood and extensive language practice for successful learning. Learners were very positive and encouraging regarding their chances to achieve communicative competence.

Other studies discussed learners' beliefs in the Saudi context, but their focus was on L2 learning in general through using Horwitz's (1987) BALLI. Therefore, they were not added to this review since the focus is on learners' beliefs about the importance of grammar and grammar learning methods.

### C. Importance of Grammar

Grammar is considered a fundamental element in L2 learning. Ellis (2002b) considered grammar a central component of language learning, and learners will experience many difficulties in understanding grammatical rules they pass by regardless of their grammar instruction method. Jean and Simard (2011) found that learning grammatical rules is important. They indicated that grammar learning is helpful for productive skills like speaking and writing. Savage et al. (2010) think that grammar is a significant skill that needs to be instructed and summarize the importance of grammar under three leading roles: grammar as an enabling skill, grammar as a motivator, and grammar as a means to self-efficacy. Emphasizing the importance of grammar and grammar instruction, Nassaji and Fotos (2004) provided four main reasons behind the importance of grammar instruction return after the dominance of communicative language teaching: First, there was a problem with the hypothesis that language can still be learned without consciousness. In this regard, they referred to noticing and attention as necessary for L2 learning. Second, there is evidence that L2 learners go through developmental stages where some grammatical structures can be taught and facilitate L2 learning. Third, much research criticized L2 teaching approaches where the focus is only on communication, and grammar has been neglected. Other studies found that although L2 learners were involved in communicative language learning for a long time, there were inaccuracies in some grammatical forms, which attracted researchers to call for some focus on grammatical forms.

Furthermore, communicative language teaching was also criticized by other researchers. Fourth, there was evidence of the positive effects of teaching grammar in language classrooms. This evidence emerges from many studies and reviews that found grammar instruction effective in learning particular language forms, providing corrective feedback, attaining better accuracy, and facilitating L2 acquisition.

### D. Grammar Learning Approaches

Some scholars, such as Krashen (1982), believe that grammar should not be explicitly taught to language learners due to its inability to affect subconscious L2 acquisition and, consequently, its inability to positively affect a learner's grammatical competence. Other scholars such as Harley and Swain (1984), Swain (1985), and Long (1991) were against this argument due to the persistence of significant grammatical errors and called for teaching L2 grammar in the classrooms. Meanwhile, other scholars such as Ellis (2006), Norris and Ortega (2000), and Nunan (1998) called for a balance between the two methods. Nunan (1998) states, "What we need is an appropriate balance between exercises that help learners come to grips with grammatical forms and tasks for exploring the use of those forms to communicate effectively" (p. 109). Although communicative language teaching exists, grammar is still explicitly explained in language classrooms (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005). According to Borg (1999), this is attributed to learners' and teachers' beliefs acquired from their learning experiences. Therefore, grammar remains taught traditionally with a significant focus on form accuracy and learning grammatical rules through many exercises (Jean & Simard, 2011). As a result, for the return of grammar instruction in the L2 classrooms, there have been different modes of grammar teaching and learning, as explained below.

Implicit and explicit grammar instruction represents two fundamental approaches to teaching and learning grammar. Implicit instruction involves learning through exposure to language without explicit focus on grammatical rules. Communicative language teaching often adopts implicit instruction, promoting naturalistic language acquisition similar to how individuals acquire their first language. On the other hand, explicit instruction involves the direct teaching of grammatical rules, structures, and forms. This approach aims to provide learners with a conscious understanding of the language's grammatical rules.

Oxford et al. (2007) explained that implicit grammar instruction can occur under Focus on Meaning and Focus on Form. Focus on Meaning prioritizes meaning over grammar, with no explicit supply of grammatical rules. Focus on Form still emphasizes meaning but enhances the target form without making it explicit. Explicit grammar instruction encompasses inductive and deductive modes. Inductive grammar learning focuses on form without making the target form explicit, while deductive grammar learning provides explicit grammatical rules to learners (Larsen-Freeman, 2001).

Implicit grammar learning occurs unconsciously or with little attention to forms, while explicit grammar learning involves a conscious intention to identify regularities in the input and comprehend the underlying concepts and rules (Hulstijn, 2005). Consciousness is pivotal in distinguishing between these grammar learning modes. Some perceive

implicit grammar learning as wholly unconscious, while others, such as Ellis (1995) and Schmidt (1995), argue for varying degrees of consciousness. Explicit learning comprises inductive and deductive modes. Inductive learning involves inferring rules from presented examples, while deductive learning entails receiving rules before encountering examples (DeKeyser, 1994).

After this review of the literature on the importance and approaches of grammar learning and instruction and the definition of learners' beliefs concerning some studies that investigated learners' beliefs from grammar learning and instruction perspectives, the present study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the participants' beliefs on the importance of L2 grammar learning? And why?
2. What are the participants' preferences and beliefs for L2 grammar learning methods? And why?

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Participants

One hundred seventy-two male participants enrolled in an English language program (A2 level following the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages) at Jubail English Language and Preparatory Year Institute, Saudi Arabia, were involved in this study. All participants were L1 speakers of Arabic and ranged from 17 to 21 years of age. The language program included 14 hours a week for language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) where grammar was implicitly taught in the skills' textbook, 3 hours a week were assigned to teach grammar using a grammar textbook explicitly, 3 hours a week were for vocabulary learning, and one hour a week for e-learning English in language labs.

#### B. Instruments

Beliefs studies are categorized into three types: first, the normative approach, which deals with beliefs as pre-determined statements; second, the metacognitive approach, which uses learners' self-reports and interviews to identify learners' beliefs; third, the contextual approach, which deploys narratives, ethnographies, and metaphors to find learners' beliefs (Barcelos, 2000). The present study follows the first and second approaches to consolidate the quantitative and qualitative results; however, there are problems with these approaches as learners sometimes do not describe their beliefs precisely, and researchers think that learners are aware of their beliefs and they can verbalize them, which is not always the case (Ellis, 2008).

#### C. Questionnaire

Two questions were created to elicit participants' responses about their beliefs about the importance of grammar learning and their preferences for grammar learning approaches. The first question asked participants to what extent of importance they believe grammar learning is. The participants had to choose one of the following options: Not Important (1), Important (2), or Very Important (3). The second question asked the participants about their preferences for learning grammar, where the participants chose learning grammar implicitly (1) or explicitly (2). These two questions were assigned to mainly focus on learners' beliefs of grammar importance and learning approach preferences.

#### D. Focus-Group Interviews

A couple of weeks after completing the two questions about grammar learning importance and preference in the questionnaire, four focus-group interviews with 6 participants, each randomly selected, were conducted to deeply understand learners' perspectives of grammar learning importance and preferences. Due to their information-richness and flexibility (Dörnyei, 2007), focus-group interviews in the present study aimed at hearing learners' voices and following up on why they chose specific options on the questionnaire in terms of grammar learning importance and why they prefer to learn grammar explicitly or implicitly, on the one hand. On the other hand, participants would hopefully encourage each other to participate in the discussion and address emerging points by providing tangible data.

#### E. Data Collection

During Week 13 of the first semester (two weeks before the end of the semester), the researcher contacted his colleagues to request their students' permission to be invited to participate in the present study. All participants were informed that they had the freedom to withdraw from the study whenever they wanted to. They were notified that their responses would be confidential and used only for research purposes. Participants completed the questionnaire using Google Forms during their e-learning classes, and its successful completion rate was 77%.

Researchers have to conduct the focus-group interviews in the primary language of the participants (Krueger & Casey, 2002). The researcher (as moderator) conducted four focus-group interviews in Arabic during four skills classes and for one hour each. Arabic was used in the interviews to allow participants to express themselves and share their beliefs and thoughts more comfortably. The 24 selected participants agreed to participate in the focus-group interviews and were informed to withdraw from the study if they wanted to. They were informed that the interviews would be recorded for data analysis and would be confidential.

#### F. Analysis

Quantitative data for the two research questions regarding participants' beliefs of the importance and preferences of

grammar learning were collected from Google Forms and analyzed. To further obtain more information about participants' beliefs about the importance of grammar learning, participants were asked in the four focus-group interviews to explain why they believed that grammar learning was very important, important, or not important. Similarly, they were asked why they prefer learning grammar explicitly or implicitly. The participants' audio responses were transferred into texts on Microsoft Word and translated into English. The translation was shared with another colleague for verification. The coding process started to identify the main themes in the interviews. In the following coding round, participants' responses were classified into minor concepts where illustrative quotes were picked up. The illustrative quotes are presented in the following section.

#### IV. RESULTS

Quantitative data results will be presented first, followed by the qualitative data findings to answer the two research questions.

##### A. First Research Question: What Are the Participants' Beliefs on the Importance of L2 Grammar Learning? And Why?

Table 1 shows that out of 172 participants, only 124 (72.1%) believe grammar learning is very important. Around one-fourth of the participants (46 participants) (26.7%) think grammar learning is important. However, only 2 participants (1.2%) believe learning grammar is unimportant.

TABLE 1  
PARTICIPANTS' GRAMMAR LEARNING IMPORTANCE RESPONSES

Grammar Importance	Frequency	Percent
Very important	124	72.1%
Important	46	26.7%
Not important	2	1.2%
Total	172	100%

In addition to the quantitative results above, the researcher identified four main themes to address learners' beliefs about why learning grammar is (very) important. First, some participants believed that learning grammar is essential for sentence structure; for example, a learner commented, "I cannot build a sentence without correct structure". Another learner commented, "Grammar helps me understand word order in a sentence." Some learners talked about tenses, and a comment like "know the difference between past, present, and future" was expressed by some participants. Under this theme, some participants referred to differentiating between parts of speech, such as "Grammar helped me learn differences between adjectives and adverbs and how to use them in sentences". Some participants commented, "Because of grammar learning, I can notice the singular and plural nouns". One participant commented on using countable and uncountable nouns, emphasizing that "grammar assists me in identifying count and non-count nouns." In contrast, another participant said, "Due to grammar learning, I can ask questions using correct question words." Another comment the moderator heard more than once was, "Similar to Arabic, I learned that an English sentence has a subject, a verb, and sometimes an object".

Communication in writing was identified as another central theme emphasizing the importance of grammar learning. Some participants commented, "I need grammar to do my writing homework". Writing exams and quizzes were of a higher level of importance to learners. Therefore, a comment like "When I have a writing quiz, I should use correct grammar; otherwise, I will lose marks" was heard. Written communication at work was referred to with comments like "Because I will write emails at work in the future, so I should write without grammatical mistakes" and "I must write reports at work where there is no tolerance for grammatical errors." One participant commented that writing accurately on social media was necessary: "On social media, I need to use grammar correctly while writing in English to convey my comments or reviews." Feeling embarrassed by grammar errors is another aspect that highlights the importance of learning grammar. One participant elaborated, "When I write with grammar mistakes, the other person will feel that my English is weak".

Whereas some participants commented on written communication, spoken communication was another identified theme that reflects the importance of grammar learning by some other participants. Formal communication with instructors at school is one form of spoken communication where grammar learning helped some participants speak to their instructors correctly; for instance, "Learning grammar enabled me to speak with my instructors at the English institute comfortably." Having sufficient grammar knowledge encouraged one participant to participate in speaking tasks as he commented, "I want to show my teacher that I use correct grammar in the speaking exercises." Grammar learning benefited participants' confidence as one participant commented, "I feel more confident when I speak using correct grammar". Another participant revealed, "My classmates will better understand me when we speak in the classroom." Speaking to native speakers was another aspect where grammar learning helped one participant; in his words, "I think native speakers will get what I am saying if I speak with correct grammar." One participant's responses showed that grammar learning is essential while giving a presentation; he commented, "I need to use the right grammar when I give a presentation in English".

Another theme regarding the importance of grammar learning is that grammar is a fundamental base for learning a language. Examples were comments like, "If there is no grammar, I think we cannot understand how English is written

or spoken." The concept of grammar's importance to adult learners was present when a participant responded, "Grammar is important for me now to understand how the language works, although grammar was not that important for me when I was younger." Learning the grammar of a language indicates learning more about its syntax and phonetics, which attracts learners to compare the language they are learning to their mother tongue. For example, a participant responded, "When I learn grammar and hear new sounds in English, I check if we have similar grammatical rules or sounds in Arabic." For some participants without learning basic grammatical rules, controlling learning of that language would be impossible. One participant reported, "Without learning the most important grammar rules, I think I will not be able to succeed in learning that language".

When the moderator asked the participants in all groups a general question about the importance of learning grammar, all participants agreed that learning grammar is very important, which is primarily congruent with the quantitative data findings.

#### *B. Second Research Question: What are the Participants' Preferences and Beliefs for L2 Grammar Learning Methods? And Why?*

As shown in Table 2, out of 172 participants, 110 (64%) preferred to learn grammar implicitly. However, 62 participants (36%) preferred to learn grammar explicitly.

TABLE 2  
PARTICIPANTS' GRAMMAR LEARNING PREFERENCES RESPONSES

Grammar Learning Preference	Frequency	Percent
Implicit	110	64%
Explicit	62	36%
Total	172	100%

The quantitative data in Table 2 above can be well understood by looking at the participants' responses in the focus-group interviews. Initially, the moderator asked participants at the beginning of each focus-group interview how they prefer to learn grammar, explicitly or implicitly. Then, that question was followed by asking participants why. Participants' responses directed coding to include three principal codes: explicit and implicit methods. Under these two principal codes, ten themes emerged based on the interview discussion.

Participants' responses to the first question showed that some preferred to learn grammar explicitly, and others preferred to learn grammar implicitly. When the moderator asked participants why they preferred that particular way to learn grammar, the responses were different and categorized under emerging themes, as explained below.

Participants who preferred to learn grammar explicitly reported some reasons through the following themes: 1) Clarity with more explanations and examples: Many participants reported that explicit learning allows them to "Learn in detail about grammar rules," other participants referred to "Many pictures and charts assist in explicit grammar learning," one participant revealed "In the grammar textbook, I can see many example sentences on the same rule," and another participant's response was "I learn more about rules and their exceptions in the grammar textbooks but not in the skills textbook". 2) Level of English proficiency: Some participants linked learning grammar explicitly to their language proficiency, such as the comment, "Grammar rules are very interconnected, and beginners need to make differences," some participants showed no ambiguity tolerance as they commented, "Beginners need to learn a step by step to have a good progress," after a short discussion about the differences between implicit and explicit grammar learning one participant stated "Implicit grammar learning comes after having a considerable progress in learning the language," he added "I think I need to initially learn grammar explicitly to have enough understanding, I must learn grammar explicitly until I am able to apply the rule and use them in correct sentences," in the same vein, one participant reported "I am in A2 level now, and I am learning many grammatical rules, but when I reach B1Plus level, I think my focus on grammar will decrease". 3) Critical thinking: A few participants explained that they think more of how grammar works as one participant commented, "When grammar is explained explicitly, I start thinking of how sentences are constructed and why they are constructed that way," similarly, another participant indicated, "explicit learning let me think of how to start and end a sentence, and how to put words in the correct order". 4) Variety of exercises and preparation for tests: Many participants referred to the abundance and variety of grammar exercises they do in their grammar textbook and how that prepared them well for their grammar tests, for example, "We have different types of exercises such as completing sentences, true or false, word order, matching, and multiple choice exercises which enhance learning grammar, but you cannot find this in learning grammar in the skills book," another participant commented "Our grammar course makes me well prepared for grammar exams, I usually have very good scores due to exercise drills". 5) Interest in grammar: Two participants expressed their interest in learning grammar, for instance, one commented, "because of my interest in learning grammar, I think explicit learning is good for me" he added "Implicit grammar learning is enough for students who do not have interest in grammar." Another response revealed, "I love learning foreign languages, and I also love learning their grammar".

Regarding participants who preferred to learn grammar implicitly, five reasons summarized from the emerging themes as follows: 1) Learning used language, not grammar: Many participants underscored the importance of learning used language but not grammatical rules: "I learn English to use the language not to memorize grammar," another participant response was, "I learn expressions and phrases in examples without paying attention to grammar, grammar is

underlying". Other comments included, "Grammar is learned while practicing reading, writing, speaking and listening." 2) Immediate practice in real contexts: Participants preferred learning grammar implicitly because this way allowed them to practice grammar in real examples through other skills immediately: "I immediately practice grammar rules in speaking and writing," another participant added, "I practice the rule before I know about it and when I know about it, it becomes understood easily". Other skills such as reading, listening, and writing encouraged participants to practice grammar in different contexts as stated, "In the skills textbook I can see more real examples where the rule is used in reading texts or listening texts, but in the grammar textbook most of the example are single sentences," writing was also reported as another source of learning grammar in a context as one participant commented, "When I write a text my teacher corrects my grammatical errors where I learn grammar". 3) Grammar taught implicitly in schools: Most participants said they learned grammar implicitly in primary, intermediate, and high school. This has impacted their grammar learning, and when they were exposed to explicit grammar learning at their language institute, it was odd for many of them, so comments like "Since we start learning English at primary school, grammar was integrated with other skills, I think this is good enough to learn grammar," and "The way we used to explore grammatical rules in high school was interesting," were reported. 4) No extra load: Some participants pointed out that learning grammar explicitly in a designated course increases their language learning load. Thus, comments like "I think learning grammar explicitly in a separate class will add more load on me, so it is better to learn grammar with other skills," and "For me, doing speaking and writing exercises is better than learning unneeded grammar" were reported. One participant similarly commented, "I think it is enough to learn grammar during skills classes since I can get my message delivered". 5) Boredom: A few participants attributed their preference for implicit learning to boredom caused by explicit grammar learning in comments like "I get bored when we spend one whole class learning grammar" and "Although doing many grammar exercises is helpful, I think it is boring because we need to do some speaking or listening or writing practices". Another participant commented, "My grammar book is not attractive as it mainly contains rules and exercises with some ugly pictures".

## V. DISCUSSION

Quantitative results of the first research question indicated that 98.8% of the participants in the present study reported grammar learning as "important" or "very important." Similar studies such as Jean and Simard (2011) reached similar findings. Horwitz (1999) was accurate when he claimed that if there is a clear tendency among the majority in a group to share the same belief, there is always a minor group of learners who endorse a counter-belief of the majority, which is the case in the present study where 1.2% of the participants believed that grammar learning was not important.

Qualitative results from focus group interviews explained why grammar learning is important to the participants in the present study. Grammar learning was important to students in the present study because it enhances many aspects of their grammar learning. One of these aspects is sentence structures, where students benefit from grammar learning by paying attention to how words are ordered in an English sentence, how to differentiate between various tenses, how to distinguish between parts of speech, how singular and plural nouns are different, how count and non-count nouns in English are used, how to ask a question using question words, and how subjects, verbs, and objects exist in the English sentence. The attention paid to structure is what Ellis (2001) called form-focused instruction, which means "any planned or incidental instructional activity intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form" (p. 1). The importance of learning sentence structure is highlighted by Nunan (1998), who assumes that such grammar learning provides learners with the needed formal declarative mastery. Participants' beliefs about the importance of sentence structure are attributed to their interest in learning how grammatical components are used in building English sentences.

Another aspect that enforces the importance of grammar learning to the participants in the present study is written and spoken communication. The qualitative results displayed that grammar learning is important for the participants to communicate adequately in writing and speaking forms. In written communication, grammar learning assisted participants in correctly writing homework, exams, quizzes, emails, reports at work in the future, comments, and reviews on social media, and eliminating their fear of making grammatical mistakes. In spoken communication, the participants indicated that grammar learning encouraged them to speak with their language teachers in the institute where they learn English, to speak in their language classrooms, to speak with their classmates, to speak with native speakers out of the classrooms, to give presentations in English, and to have more confidence to speak in English. Communication is a pivotal part of L2 learning. Male (2011) states, "the fact that the main objective of learning a language is to use it as a means of communication makes grammar essential" (p. 59). Regarding communication, the present study's findings are congruent with Almazloum (2018) and Ellis (2002a), who underscored the importance of grammar learning for L2 written and spoken communication. The importance of grammar for written and spoken communication to the participants in this study may be linked to their desire to adequately communicate in English since their college studies prepare them for future jobs where English is the means of communication.

The importance of grammar learning was also represented in another aspect. The participants referred to grammar learning as a fundamental base for learning a language because it assists their understanding of written and spoken texts, asserts the importance of grammar learning for them as adult learners, enables them to learn more about the language syntax and phonetics, and facilitates their control of L2 learning. These findings are similar to the findings of Loewen et al. (2009), whose participants believed that learning grammar is central to their L2 learning, and Almazloum (2018),

who found grammar as syntax and versatility of grammar among his participants' beliefs. The importance of grammar as a fundamental base is associated with the participants' thoughts of learning grammar in their mother tongue (Arabic), where they spent years learning Arabic grammatical rules in primary, intermediate, and high school with high emphasis by their teachers on the importance of controlling Arabic grammar.

The quantitative findings of the second research question indicated that a little less than two-thirds (64%) of the participants preferred to learn grammar implicitly; however, a little more than one-third (36%) preferred to learn grammar explicitly. This finding contradicts Stratton (2023), who found that most of his participants preferred explicit learning. An essential factor that might affect learners' language instruction method is their learning styles (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990). Therefore, participants' learning styles in the present study might impact their preferences for grammar learning.

The qualitative findings explained why participants preferred to learn grammar explicitly or implicitly. Participants who preferred explicit grammar learning reported that explicit grammar learning provided more clarity with more explanations and examples, which is similar to the findings of Loewen et al. (2009). When students stress clarity, their learning style is less tolerant of ambiguity (Richards & Rappen, 2014); thus, explicit grammar learning enables them to be sure about their grammatical knowledge. Participants also preferred explicit grammar learning due to its benefits for their beginner language level. This contradicts Etherington (2006), whose beginner participants had a less positive belief about grammar learning. In the present study, beginner learners might perceive the importance of learning basic grammar earlier to facilitate language learning. Another reason why the participants preferred explicit grammar learning is that it allowed them to think critically about how and why an English sentence is constructed in a particular way and why sentences follow a particular word order. Thinking critically about the language is attributed to the participants' intention to discover the language, which matches Nunan (1998), who encouraged "learners to become active explorers of language" (p. 106). Another reason why some participants preferred explicit grammar learning is because practicing the given grammatical rule in various exercises prepared them well for tests. Although exercises in grammar textbooks involve repetition, manipulation, and language transformation, they are presented out of context and in isolated sentences (Nunan, 1998). Such exercises might contribute to the participants' performance in grammar tests. However, they are provided in isolated sentences out of context, so the participants preferred such grammar exercises. Interest in learning L2 grammar is another reason some participants prefer explicit grammar learning, which attracted Al-Malki and Javid (2018) to encourage identifying learners' interests to decide the appropriate pedagogical approach.

The participants who preferred implicit grammar learning had some reasons for this preference. One of the reasons was that implicit grammar learning focuses on using grammar in context rather than learning grammar in isolated examples, which was communicatively effective. This finding is similar to Nassaji and Fotos (2004) and Tanaka (2004), who also stressed the importance of communicative competence. The participants who preferred learning grammar in contexts might be more interested in how to communicate regardless of grammar accuracy. The participants also pointed out that implicit grammar learning exposed them to practice grammatical rules immediately in authentic contexts. Practicing grammatical rules in real contexts attracts learners' attention to what Larsen-Freeman (2001) called "grammaring rather than grammar" (p. 255), in which learners achieve the goal of conveying the message accurately in authentic contexts. The participants who preferred implicit grammar learning explained that they were previously taught grammar implicitly in schools before they joined the language institute. They used to learn grammar implicitly, and introducing explicit grammar learning to them in the language institute contradicted their preferred or usual approach to grammar learning. Here, learners' learning styles should be considered, as Oxford (2017) indicated that learning styles influence how learners respond to grammar presentations in grammar textbooks or L2 classes. The participants who preferred implicit grammar learning encountered extra load as grammar was explicitly instructed in a separate class. They believed that implicit grammar learning in their skill classes was sufficient. As mentioned earlier, the participants in the present study are exposed to implicit and explicit grammar instruction in their language institute, which might influence how they learn grammar. Institutional designs and learning goals should be addressed as they contribute to shaping grammar learning and instruction (Oxford et al., 2007). The last reason participants reported their preference for implicit grammar learning was boredom caused by explicit grammar learning. This finding is congruent with Jean and Simard (2011), who found that grammar instruction was effective, though it was boring for many L2 learners. This boredom might be attributed to the nature of explicit grammar instruction in isolated sentences and textbooks, which might not be attractive to the participants due to the magnitude of grammar exercises and examples.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study sought to investigate learners' beliefs about the importance and preferences of L2 grammar learning because learners' beliefs play a significant role in their L2 learning. The present study has emphasized the importance of L2 grammar learning among adult language learners, as most participants believed learning L2 grammar was important or very important. For instance, grammar learning was important or very important to many students due to its role in building sentence structures. Another example is that many learners believed that grammar learning was important or very important because of vitality regarding spoken and written communication. Furthermore, the present study found that around two-thirds of the participants preferred to learn grammar implicitly, and around one-third preferred to learn grammar explicitly. The beliefs of the participants who preferred explicit grammar learning encompassed clarity

provided by explanations and examples, benefits of explicit grammar learning for beginner L2 learners, allowing learners to think critically while learning language, readiness for language quizzes and tests through many practices and exercises, and interest in L2 grammar learning. However, participants' beliefs of implicit grammar learning included its benefits in using grammar in contexts, immediate practicing for grammar in a natural context, extra learning load caused by explicit grammar learning, and avoiding the boredom caused by explicit grammar instruction.

#### A. Implications

Exploring learners' beliefs about L2 grammar learning is an excellent opportunity for language teachers to identify their students' perceptions toward their L2 learning. This will also assist students in being more aware of their learning beliefs and evaluating them, and at the same time, teachers treat the mismatch between their and their students' beliefs regarding L2 learning (Ellis, 2008).

This study attempts to enhance L2 grammar learning and instruction in similar contexts where adult learners learn EFL. It is a response to Larsen-Freeman (2015), who stated, "I argue that not much second language acquisition or applied linguistics research on grammar has made its way into the classroom" (p. 263). Consequently, hearing learners' voices regarding their L2 learning might assist educational establishments in having better preparations, arrangements, rules, assessments, and learning environments for their L2 learners.

Since the present study's findings indicated that implicit grammar learning is preferred more than explicit grammar learning, the language institute of the participants in the present study should consider such findings. Although grammar is timidly instructed implicitly in the skills classes, students are still engaged in three weekly grammar classes where grammar is taught explicitly. At least, there should be a balance between the two methods, as highlighted by many scholars. In that balanced approach, learners "learn how to form structures correctly, and also how to use them to communicate meaning" (Nunan, 1998, p. 103).

Participants' preference for implicit grammar learning implies enhancing their communicative competence. Thus, they are assumed to be exposed to more real contexts where they practice grammatical rules in real situations. According to Nassaji and Fotos (2004), "if the goal of second language learning is the development of communicative competence, enabling learners to use language for communicative purposes, then grammar and communication must be integrated" (p. 131).

#### B. Limitations

There are some limitations to the present study. One of the limitations is the focus of the participants on A2 level students only. A more comprehensive understanding of learners' beliefs about the importance of grammar and their preferences would be gained if the sample included other language levels of the population (B1 and B1 Plus level students). There might be other voices from students in upper language levels toward grammar importance and learning preferences, which is a gap in the context of the present study that other studies might fill.

Another limitation is that it included only male students, and the voice of female students was absent in this regard. This is due to the education system in Saudi Arabia, where male and female college students do not study together. Female students might provide different perspectives or perceptions about the importance of grammar and learning preferences. This is still a research area that needs to be explored in the context of the present study to see how the beliefs of male and female students interact.

Participants' learning styles have not been explored in the present study, although identifying them might provide a better understanding of participants' learning preferences for learning grammar explicitly or implicitly. Other studies might investigate the relationship between grammar learning method preferences and learning styles.

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