

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS GRAMMAR ASSESSMENT IN THE EFL CLASSROOM¹

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore how grammar assessment in the EFL classroom was implemented at the English Department of the State Islamic University of Ar-Raniry (UIN Ar-Raniry). The researcher investigated learners' perspectives regarding the congruence of the grammar assessment with the planned learning, assessment authenticity, transparency, and their capability in the classroom. A total of 69 fourth-year students of the English Department responded to the questionnaire with 24 five-point Likert scale items. The quantitative data of Students' Perceptions of Assessment Questionnaire (SPAQ) items were descriptively analysed using the SPSS16 program. The result offers significant insights into the ways students viewed classroom-based grammar assessments. It was shown that students perceived a slight congruence between grammar assessment and planned learning, as well as inadequate transparency regarding the purpose, authenticity, and assessment forms. Moreover, the result indicates that their perceived capability in taking the assessment was rather unsatisfactory.

Keywords: Students' Perception, Grammar, Assessment, Language Learning, Classroom Assessment

INTRODUCTION

The role of grammar in language acquisition has remained relatively significant. Grammar is deemed to be worthy of study – to the extent that in the Middle Ages in Europe, it was thought to be the foundation of all knowledge and the gateway to sacred and secular understanding (Hillocks and Smith, 1991). As it notably contributes to the success of language learning program, classroom-based grammar instruction must be taken into serious account with regard to its task design, teaching process and most importantly, classroom assessment. Purpura (2004) stated that the grammar-translation approach which was included in a summative assessment had become more about learning a set of linguistic rules than about learning to use the language for a communicative

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purpose. This type of assessment regularly asks students to choose correct grammatical forms by answering multiple-choice questions. Such tests can be useful for measuring students' knowledge of language forms. However, instructors need to revisit and consider the goal of language learning, in which learners should aspire to be fluent communicators by displaying authentic language use, rather than become "grammar nazis". Students should be ready to use their English to communicate in a real-life situation and perform superb communication skills. Therefore, an appropriate grammar assessment will significantly influence the favourable target of language learning. Black and William (1998) reviewed more than 250 articles and books to examine the effect of formative assessment on students' performance. They found that employing different methods to assess students during the course would enhance students' success. The works on formative assessment suggest that new approaches to increase valuable feedback will change classroom practices and bring adjustment in learning and teaching.

At the English Department of UIN Ar-Raniry, the lecturers had a wide variety of grammar assessments. Some lecturers provided authentic material and delivered precious feedback to the students, while others still performed a grammar-translation method and designed a dysfunctional evaluation in the classroom. This distinction reflects the assumption on whether the assessment is used to improve language instructions or maintain the repeated latent routines. Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens (2005) claimed that the experience of learning that was diminished by assessment methods were perceived to be inappropriate. Hence, students' perceptions need to be investigated, especially on whether the assessment forms are congruent with the validity, authenticity and transparency of the test. Further, students' awareness of their capabilities is also needed to design better grammar teaching and learning instruction. Therefore, the significance of the present study relies on learners' perceptions towards the implementation of grammar assessment, which must be taken into consideration by educational authorities and instructors to indicate the quality of grammar teaching and learning.

It is no doubt that students' perception is relevant to the success of classroom assessment. Thus, this paper aims to gain insights into the perspectives of English Department students of the State Islamic University of Ar-Raniry on their grammar assessment. There are several reasons why students' perception is of great significance for classroom assessment. First, evaluating assessment procedures is one viable way to determine the right path to the goal of the teaching-learning process. Since students are the primary information source for evaluating assessment procedures, thus the quality of assessment methods implemented in the classroom can be observed from their attitudes and viewpoints. As quoted from Rowntree's (1987, p.1) work, if "we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must first look to its assessment procedures". Second, students' involvement in classroom assessments makes the learning process more meaningful. For instance, if students are aware that the assessments given to them are not congruent to the goal of language learning, they will supposedly speak up their voice to the teachers. As Dhindsa, Omar, and Waldrip (2007) noted, by examining students' perceptions of the assessment, it stimulates teachers to develop an authentic and realistic approach for evaluation in the future.

Additionally, the information gained from students' perception about grammar assessment will not only encourage and accommodate teachers to demonstrate appropriate classroom assessment activities but also boost students' achievement. Further, students' perceptions of assessments will affect their learning approach and will change the extent to which they are successful in their classrooms (Mussawy, 2009). For example, the empirical research done by Alkharusi, Aldhafri, Alnabhani, and Alkalbani (2014) has proved that students' perceptions towards classroom assessment practices can be associated with students' academic progression on self-efficacy. By collecting data from 1,457 secondary school students and 99 teachers, their research has gained pleasant collaboration between

the teaching staff and students to improve the quality of teaching-learning. The study suggests that a shared understanding exists among the faculty members and students concerning the primary purpose of classroom assessment, improving instruction and increasing learning.

Classroom assessment holds an essential part in language teaching and learning. Assessment, defined as “a systematic process for gathering data about student achievement,” is an integral component of education (Dhindsa, Omar, and Waldrip, 2007, p.1261). Udoukpong and Okon (2012) explained that information gathered in assessments and evaluations is used to shape strategies for improvement at each level of the education system. Specifically, at the classroom level, teachers may collect information on students’ understanding of the instruction and adjust teaching to meet identified learning needs. On the other hand, Black and William (1998) asserted that assessment is more of collaborative activities between teachers and students. They defined assessment broadly as a term which includes all activities teachers and students undertake to get information that can be used analytically to alter teaching and learning. This definition considers proper assessment that involves continuing preparation, practice, and evaluation to be an essential component of language learning.

A related study was conducted by Cheng, Wu, and Liu (2015) by involving 620 university students from three universities to investigate the relationship between students’ perceptions of assessment tasks and classroom assessment environment within the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in China. The instrument that was used to measure students’ perceptions of the classroom assessment environment was designed based on Dorman and Knightley’s (2006) Perceptions of Assessment Tasks Inventory (PATI) and Alkharusi’s (2011) scale. From the results, it can be inferred that there was a match between assessment and learning from these students’ point of view. Yet, the students were scarcely involved in determining the criteria of evaluation which led to the performance-based assessment.

Another research on students’ perceptions of assessment was investigated by Al Kadri, Al-Moamary, Magzoub, Roberts, and van der Vleuten (2011). Fourteen students and eight clinical supervisors from Sydney Medical School and twelve students and thirteen clinical supervisors from King Saud bin Abdulaziz University were involved in qualitative semi-structured interviews. In their study, it can be concluded that cultural differences and emotions can affect students’ perceptions towards the implementation of assessment in the classroom and their learning styles.

In addition to those previous studies, this research aims to explore the perceptions of undergraduate students in the English Department of the State Islamic University of Ar-Raniry on the grammar assessment given by their lecturers. This research, further, investigates the students’ awareness of the grammar teaching-learning process and how the experiences led to their successful language learning.

METHOD

Research design

Prior to undertaking the investigation, ethical clearance was obtained from fourth-year English Department students of the State Islamic University of Ar-Raniry, Banda Aceh. This study employed total sampling. The participants were selected because they had been taught by and acquainted with more grammar lecturers in the department than their juniors. Seventy-four students who were divided into three groups were given a questionnaire. Sixty-nine of them returned the questionnaire. When filling in the questionnaire, the participants were assisted by the researcher in order to avoid any misconception or misunderstanding of the questions.

Instrument

The researcher selected the Student Perceptions of Assessment Questionnaire (SPAQ) as the instrument of the research. It was adopted from the questionnaire developed by Dorman and Knightley's (2006) Perceptions of Assessment Tasks Inventory (PATI), with 24 items included. The instrument was used to inquire about students' perceptions in five dimensions (scales). The questionnaire was divided into five subscales. The five subscales and their respective descriptions are: Scale 1 (Items 1-5) measures the element of congruence with planned learning; Scale 2 (Items 6-10) measures authenticity; Scale 3 (Items 11-15) measures student consultation; Scale 4 (Items 15-20) measures transparency; and Scale 5 (Items 21-24) measures student capabilities.

Procedure

The researcher used a quantitative method to investigate the learners' perceptions of grammar assessment at the English Department of the State Islamic University of Ar-Raniry. The instrument investigated both students' perceptions and opinions. More specifically, with 24 five-point Likert scale items, it was used to investigate learners' perspectives regarding the congruence of the teaching-learning plan, assessment authenticity, transparency, consultation, and students' capability in the classroom. The items on the scale were coded as Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Undecided, Agree, and Strongly Agree. The questionnaire was distributed in three different classes. All classes were provided with the same instructions by the researcher to avoid error and misunderstanding. Statistical significance was analysed using the SPSS16 program.

Research question

In particular, this research aims to address one main research question:

How do students in the English Department of State Islamic University of Ar-Raniry perceive their classroom-based grammar assessment with regard to the congruence with the planned learning, assessment authenticity, transparency, students' consultation, and their capability in the classroom?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to demonstrate the overall perception of students based on the five-scale (24 items) assessment questionnaire. Those five scales were: congruence with planned learning, assessment authenticity, students' consultation about assessment, transparency of assessment, and students' capabilities.

Table 1. Congruence with Planned Learning

Items on Questionnaire	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. My assessment in grammar class tests what I memorize.	69	2.93	1.15
2. My assessment in grammar class tests what I understand.	69	2.61	1.07
3. My assignments are about what I have done in class.	69	2.26	1.12
4. How I am assessed is similar to what I do in class.	69	2.51	.95
5. I am assessed on what the teacher has taught me.	69	2.57	1.09
Valid N (listwise)	69	2.57	

From the table, students' responses to the item 1 and item 2 show a slight variance. The value

for question 1 ('what students memorize') is a little bit higher than 'what students understand' in question 2, with the mean score comparison of $2.93 > 2.61$. It indicates that students perceived the assessment given in the classroom as only a measure of memorization rather than a measure of understanding. Interestingly, there was no significant difference between item 4 and item 5. In other words, students admitted that they were assessed based on what teachers had taught them and given similar tasks in accordance with what they had done in the class.

Table 2. The Authenticity

Items on Questionnaire	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
6. I am asked to apply my learning to real life situations.	69	1.99	.88
7. My grammar class assessment tasks are useful for everyday life.	69	1.90	.83
8. I find my grammar class tasks are relevant to what I do outside of class.	69	1.93	.75
9. Assessment in grammar class tests my ability to apply what I know to real-life problems.	69	2.01	.88
10. Assessment in grammar class examines my ability to answer everyday questions	69	2.29	.97
11. I can show others that my learning has helped me do things.	69	2.13	.92
Valid N (listwise)	69	2.04	

Among the 5 Likert scales, none of the items of authenticity questionnaire reached half of it. It means that the assessment of grammar class in the English department of UIN Ar-Raniry was perceived as irrelevant by the students. Despite no significant mean score among the items, the highest mean score was ($M=2.29$) from item number 10, which indicates that the assessment given in the classroom was to examine students' ability to answer everyday questions. Further, statistical tests revealed that Item 7 was the one having the lowest score ($M= 1.90$). This implies that little of the grammar assessment was viewed to bring benefits to students' daily communication. This particular item investigates whether students were facilitated by the assessment to use correct grammar in productive skills like speaking and writing. If the students perceived that the test given was not authentic, it means that the real purpose of studying grammar was slightly spoiled.

Table 3. Student Consultation

Items on Questionnaire	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
12. In grammar class I am clear about the types of assessment being used.	69	1.70	.81
13. I am aware how my assessment will be marked.	69	1.70	.73
14. My teacher has explained to me how each type of assessment is to be used.	69	1.74	.87
15. I can have a say in how I will be assessed in grammar class	69	1.80	.85
Valid N (listwise)	69	1.73	

Table 3 shows a shallow rate of students' consultation in the grammar classroom assessment. The mean scores of items 12 and 13 ($M=1.70$) hint that students were not aware of the types of assessment being used by the teachers and how they would be graded. Meanwhile, the other

two items marginally averaged higher at $M=1.74$ and $M=1.80$. This means that teachers had given students little chance to decide how they would be assessed and they had limited participation in grammar classroom assessment.

Table 4. Transparency

Items on Questionnaire	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
16. I understand what is needed in all grammar class tasks.	69	2.10	1.10
17. I am told in advance when I am being assessed.	69	1.88	.96
18. I am told in advance on what I am being assessed.	69	2.26	1.17
19. I am clear about what my teacher wants in my assessment tasks.	69	1.77	.81
20. I know how a particular assessment task will be marked.	69	1.67	.70
Valid N (listwise)	69	1.94	

Overall, the transparency of grammar classroom assessment in the English Department of UIN Ar-Raniry was rather unsatisfactory. All of the questionnaire items of transparency were rated below average. One positive point was gained from item 18, which somewhat became the most striking one. The item's mean score indicates that the students were informed about what they were being assessed. However, item 20 tells us that students barely knew how specific assessment tasks would be graded.

Table 5. Students Capabilities

Items on Questionnaire	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
21. I can complete the assessment tasks by the given time.	69	2.28	1.32
22. I am given a choice of assessment tasks.	69	1.68	.83
23. I am given assessment tasks that suit my ability.	69	1.64	.77
24. When I am confused about an assessment task, I am given another way to answer it.	69	1.61	.73
Valid N (listwise)	69	1.80	

Table 5 presents the information related to students' capabilities in the grammar class. It can be seen from the low mean scores of items 22, 23, and 24 ($M=1.68$, $M=1.64$, $M=1.61$) that the students were hardly given choices of assessment tasks suitable with their ability. Also, there were limited options for students to accomplish the tasks when they faced difficulties during the grammar teaching-learning process. However, a slightly higher mean (2.28) in item 21 suggests that students may be able to finish the tasks and homework given at a proper time even though the teachers gave them few choices of tasks in the grammar class.

Table 6. Averaged Mean Scores of Overall Students' Responses on 5-Scale Assessment Questionnaire

The Students' Perception of Assessment Questionnaire (SPAQ)	Total Mean
Congruence with Planned Learning	2.57
Authenticity of Assessment	2.04
Student Consultation about Assessment	1.73
Transparency of Assessment	1.94
Students' Capabilities	1.80

Based on the averaged mean scores of overall students' responses on five-scale assessment questionnaire in Table 6, none of them reaches a maximum averaged score of 5. However, the study shows that students perceived 'congruence with planned learning' to have the highest mean ($M = 2.57$) compared to the other four scales. Students in this case realized that they were assessed based on what they had learned and taught. When students become aware that what they are learning in the class will be tested on assessment tasks, they become more enthusiastic about investing time and energy in teaching-learning activities (Brookhart & Bronowicz, 2003; McMillan, 2000). Besides, drawn from table 6, students perceived the 'authenticity of grammar assessment' ($M = 2.04$) to be comparatively lower in score than 'congruence with planned learning'.

In other words, they were tested in accordance with what they had understood and learnt. However, the usefulness of grammar learning for everyday life was still lacking. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers and staff who are involved in the assessment decision process understand what real-life situations students are really concerned with. In terms of student consultation, the scale was marked as having the lowest averaged score ($M=1.73$). This suggests that students viewed rather negatively the types of assessment being used in their class and indicates that they could barely have a say in how they would be assessed in their classes. Additionally, based on students' responses, the average mean score shows that students received limited instruction about the use of various assessment forms in their classes. Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens (2005) reported that there is a strong relationship between student perceptions of assessments and how they approach learning. In addition to that, they also highlighted the significance of focusing more on students' role because when students feel included in the decision making of assessment modes, they become more eager to participate in the teaching-learning activities.

Regarding the capabilities of students in performing in the assessment tasks, students perceived their assessment tasks to be slightly higher than student consultation ($M = 1.80$). This implies that a few students may probably finish their assessment tasks at the given time. Yet, they were less likely to be given the choices of assessment formats and alternatives to approach a question when they were confused. Finally, the transparency was perceived to be a little more favourable ($M=1.94$) compared to consultation and student capabilities, despite the fact that it was still far from the maximum score. Thus, it is essential to attribute more information about how the assessments were designed and how teachers marked them.

CONCLUSION

Given that the study examining students' views on grammar assessment by using the SPAQ is still rare, the result of this quantitative research presents considerable insights into the ways students perceive grammar in the classroom assessments. The findings conclude that, while grammar assessments demonstrated congruence with planned learning and transparency, there was still a long way to go for further development, for instance by increasing the authenticity

of assessment tasks and involving students in the decision process. Through unraveling the multi-dimensional nature of student perceptions, this study helps readers appreciate not only the prominent character of classroom-based grammar assessments but much more beyond that. However, due to the cross-sectional data and geographically homogeneous student sample, the result of the current study should be interpreted with caution. Therefore, it is suggested that future researchers obtain a larger sample of students from various levels and regions to build a complete picture of student perceptions of language assessments, especially grammar assessments.

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APPENDIX

Students' Perceptions of Assessment Questionnaire (SPAQ)

This questionnaire aims to explore your perceptions as an English Department student of the State Islamic University of Ar-Raniry. Please read the following statements carefully and tick the boxes with the item numbers that apply to your perspective (5= strongly agree, 4= agree, 3= neutral, 2= disagree, 1= strongly disagree).

Congruence with planned learning	1=	2=	3=	4=	5=
	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
1. My assessment in grammar class tests what I memorize.					
2. My assessment in grammar class tests what I understand.					
3. My assignments are about what I have done in class.					
4. How I am assessed is similar to what I do in class.					
5. I am assessed on what the teacher has taught me.					
Authenticity					
6. I am asked to apply my learning to real life situations.					
7. My grammar class assessment tasks are useful for everyday life.					
8. I find my grammar class tasks are relevant to what I do outside of class.					
9. Assessment in grammar class tests my ability to apply what I know to real-life problems.					
10. Assessment in grammar class examines my ability to answer everyday questions					
11. I can show others that my learning has helped me do things.					
Student Consultation					
12. In grammar class I am clear about the types of assessment being used.					

13. I am aware how my assessment will be marked.

14. My teacher has explained to me how each type of assessment is to be used.

15. I can have a say in how I will be assessed in grammar class.

Transparency

16. I understand what is needed in all grammar class tasks.

17. I am told in advance when I am being assessed.

18. I am told in advance on what I am being assessed.

19. I am clear about what my teacher wants in my assessment tasks.

20. I know how a particular assessment task will be marked.

Students Capabilities

21. I can complete the assessment tasks by the given time.

22. I am given a choice of assessment tasks.

23. I am given assessment tasks that suit my ability.

24. When I am confused about an assessment task, I am given another way to answer it.
