

Why Teach Syntax?

The Importance of Surface and Deep Structures for full Comprehension of Sentences

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Abstract

Syntax is not merely a structure of words in a language, but the backbone that governs and strengthens the meaning of any text. It plays a pivotal role in communication and text comprehension. This article addresses two questions: How teachers approach teaching syntax, and how students respond to syntax instruction. To explore this, a questionnaire was distributed to (20) lecturers at the Preparatory Studies Center of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in Oman. The findings revealed widespread support for syntax teaching. Recommendations, discussion, and explanation will be deeply highlighted throughout this article.

Keywords: ESL/EFL syntax teaching, syntax instruction, grammar and sentence structure, tree diagrams in linguistics, linguistic comprehension, transformational grammar, language pedagogy, syntax and reading comprehension

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Introduction

Students are acquainted with the structure of language — semantics, morphology, simple grammar, syntax, etc. Moreover, some categories of language are theoretical, while others are purely practical. In both cases, language structure should be highlighted and studied in a way that students receive what really is beyond the surface structure of sentences. It is hard to deal with transformational syntax, deep or surface without referring to Chomsky and Chomskyan philosophy of this type of syntactic usage — tree diagrams, and his most universal example: *The cat sat on the mat*. This paper focusses on the importance of Syntax and the scientific usage of sentences that gives the most appropriate role of every word in a certain sentence.

Statement of the Problem

Both students and teachers should have a clear understanding of the exact meaning of what they read. However, readers often encounter *ambiguity*, which impedes the comprehension of both written and spoken material, making it difficult to extract intended meaning accurately.

Objectives of the Study

This study pursues the following:

1. To identify the key elements of language structure, with a particular focus on syntax.
2. To examine the criteria for interpreting a piece of literature or text clearly, without any ambiguity.

Literature Review

In any language, words do not exist at random; they should be connected to each other in a perfect way to give the exact meaning. This is linguistically known as Syntax. “Syntax refers to word order. Specifically, the order in which words are arranged to form a sentence” (BethMooreSchool, 2021, Para. 9). “One of the key elements of English teaching is syntax, which refers to the arrangement of words and phrases in sentences” (Jocelyn Seamer Education, (n.d), Para. 1).

Syntax, grammar, and semantics work hand in hand to provide the proper meaning of sentences.

Syntax is important because the order of words and phrases within a sentence can greatly impact its overall meaning. For example, the sentences below have vastly different meanings just by the unusual word order swapping two words.

My dog bit my brother.

My brother bit my dog. (Demme Learning, 2023, Para. 5).

“Syntax: the specific arrangement of words, phrases, and clauses to create a well-formed sentence. Syntax acts as a subset of grammar. In other words, all syntax rules are grammar rules, but not all grammar rules are syntax rules.” (Demme Learning, 2023, Para. 4).

Students living in an English-speaking environment do have the natural sense of Syntactic Awareness; they can form most utterances and sentences syntactically in a natural way. They can control and monitor the relationships of words in the sentences they face - written or oral.

Syntactic awareness means having the ability to monitor the relationships among the words in a sentence in order to understand while reading or composing orally or in writing. Students build syntactic awareness through exposure to oral language when they are young and particularly through exposure to written language that they hear through read aloud or independent reading (around grade 3) (Sedita, 2020, Para. 5).

Native English speakers learn syntax through repetition before they learn the parts of speech and rules of grammar. ESL students generally have little or no understanding of nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. in their native languages, so there isn't a reason to teach them that the adjective must precede the noun (Lubin, 2014, Para. 6).

Teachers play vital roles in introducing some activities in class to assist students make good sentences in a correct syntactic way. They use the jumbled way exercise -- a sentence introduced in the wrong way. Students, individually, in pairs or groups, have arrange the sentence words to get a good one.

During a sentence scramble activity, students arrange words to form a sentence. Students are given a set of words from a sentence that are out of order. They must then arrange the words into a complete sentence that follows correct English grammar. Words cannot be deleted (Sedita, 2020, Para. 7).

Unscrambling English sentences in lessons forces students to think about each word in a sentence rather than only memorizing an entire phrase without understanding the importance of structure. After repeating each word in a sentence individually, students should recognize where each belongs (Lubin, 2014, Para. 9).

Teachers should not ignore the use and importance of punctuation in giving the proper meaning of a sentence. Loose sentences become ambiguous if lack the proper punctuation. Take for example:

It you shoot yourself it is likely you will get the first prize.

The above sentence is illogical. It is unbelievable that someone shoots themselves and stays alive. However, when putting the right punctuation that really makes sense:

If you, yourself shoot, it is likely you will get the first prize.

The logical usage of sentences, oral or written, gives at least the possible meaning.

Numerous studies have shown a strong correlation between syntactic awareness and reading comprehension. Students who understand grammar and syntax rules—such as the functions of words in a sentence and the meanings associated with word order, sentence structure, and punctuation—typically have a greater ability to make sense of what they

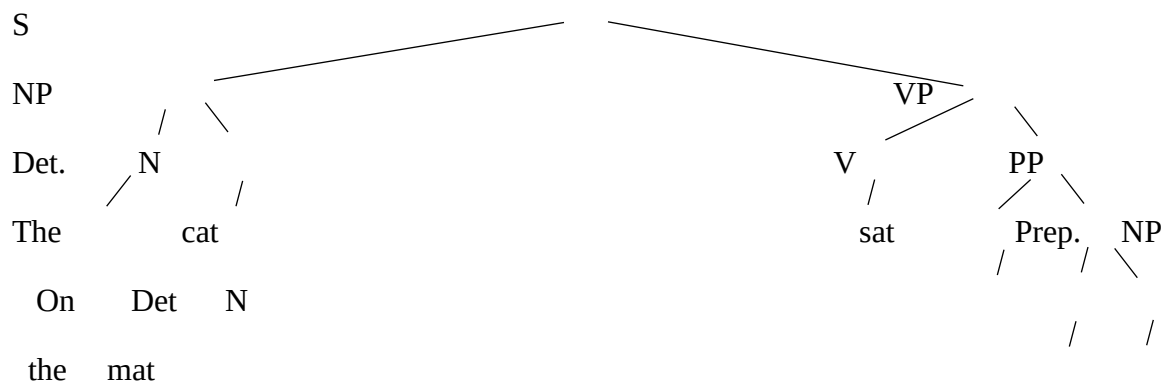
read. The more they work with different types of sentences, the better they'll be able to glean meaning while reading (Demme Learning, 2023, Para. 10).

Nobody underestimates the importance of grammar in getting correct sentences. It is the backbone of any language by which things become clearer and more logical. "We study grammar so that we can communicate effectively. We want our writing to be easy for our readers to read and understand, and we want them to get the message we intended for them" (BethMooreSchool, 2021, Para. 7).

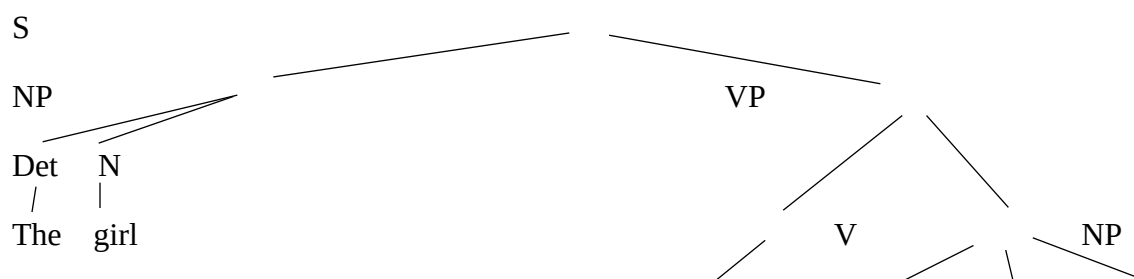
To make sure students get the full comprehension of both grammar and syntax, it is wise to follow analytical exercises that help students get into the core of the material at hand. Analyzing sentences in the normal way (Subject, Verb, Object), or by using tree diagrams is so beneficial. Let us take Chomsky's most universal example:

The cat (subject) sat (verb) on (preposition) the mat (determiner + object).

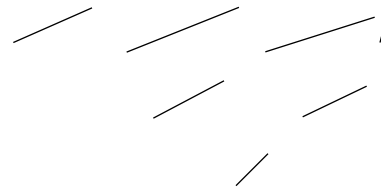
Using exercises like sentence diagramming, our Analytical Grammar program helps students gain an in-depth understanding of grammar and syntax rules. By teaching grammar and building sentence level and syntactic awareness, you will help increase your student's comprehension and composition skills (Demme Learning, 2023, Para. 18).



The girl/ put the pot/ in the kitchen.



Put	Det	N	PP
The	pot	Prep	NP
In	Det.	N	
the	kitchen		



Teachers should choose the proper lessons that suit their students' level, seek the assistance of in-house ready-made materials, or refer to the Internet. Gradually, teachers can go forward in selecting syntactic materials for their students.

Choose texts for your English lessons that contain the syntax concept you want to teach. For example, if the content descriptors for your grade say that students need to know that complex sentences contain a dependent and independent clause, then choose text that contains great examples of complex sentences. (Jocelyn Seamer Education, (n.d) Para. 3).

Students' fluency and literacy could be improved well if the teacher follows the proper process; cutting the sentence into meaningful phrases, which is called Grouping. By following up, students will be familiar with the role and function of all parts of the sentence,

Understanding the importance of grouping phrases together, or syntax, helps improve student's literacy in many ways. And by understanding syntax yourself, you can easily implement simple ideas with little planning that will teach your students the roles and function of the parts of sentences in order to become more effective in reading comprehension, writing, and fluency (Whittaker, 2024, Para. 3).

When it comes to writing paragraphs and essays, students should have the minimum rules and control of the writing skill. Writing arbitrarily, with no focus does not introduce good academic production at all, and will lead to failure. "Trying to write without understanding syntax, or sentence structure, is like driving without knowing the rules of the road" (Heckman, 2020, Para. 5).

Asking questions, especially Wh- questions, helps students understand what every part of a sentence means, or refers to. "Asking *function questions* to each word in a sentence demystifies syntax for our students and shows them how sentences are made" (Heckman, 2020, Para. 8).

Syntax is the system that governs the arrangement of all genres; without which, things become loose; no borders. Some people, when asked to explain the world Syntax, might fail, but they can use it while talking or writing. Teachers are not exempted from this accusation; on the contrary, they have to fathom the depth of it. Failure students are the same copy of their failure teachers. "For many, syntax is one of those words that you know what it is but just can't quite

explain it. So simply put, syntax is the system in which we arrange and order words to communicate meaning” (Whittaker, 2024, Para. 2).

Whether on purpose or not, if the place of a certain word is changed, the meaning of the whole piece of writing will be changed. The smart teacher always puts the proper words in the proper positions for students to avoid ambiguity, or misunderstanding.

Syntax in English is the arrangement of words and phrases in a specific order. If you change the position of even one word, it's possible to change the meaning of the entire sentence. All languages have specific rules about which words go where, and skilled writers can manipulate these rules to make sentences sound more poignant or poetic (Ellis, 2022, Para. 1).

Lubin, (2014, Para. 4) concludes that some students think that other languages are as similar as their native language. In Arabic, for example, the sentence order is (Verb, Subject, and Object), while in English it is (Subject, Verb, Object). “In many cases, students translate their native language directly into English without considering the word order that changes between languages.”

Methodology

This study utilized a quantitative research design, employing a survey method to collect data on teaching syntax. Surveys were chosen as they enable the collection of standardized and comparable data from participants, providing a foundation for systematic statistical analysis. This approach ensures that diverse perspectives on teaching syntax are captured and analyzed effectively, contributing to the study's reliability and generalizability.

Participants

The participants, consisting of (20) male and female lecturers, teach at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Ibri. They represent diverse nationalities, including the United States, South Africa, Iran, Pakistan, and India. All participants are experienced educators with teaching backgrounds at various universities and colleges.

Sampling Strategy

Due to logistical constraints, the sample size was limited to (20) participants. A convenience sampling method was employed, as the lecturers were easily accessible to the researchers during the study period. While this approach facilitated data collection, the relatively small sample size is acknowledged as a limitation, potentially restricting the generalizability of the findings.

Research Instrument

A researcher-designed questionnaire was developed to explore teachers' perspectives and practices related to teaching syntax. The questionnaire consisted of (15) items and three sections: Likert-scale questions, multiple-choice questions, and one open-ended question. It was structured to capture participants' opinions on various aspects of syntax teaching, including methodology, challenges, and its impact on students' comprehension and communication skills. The instrument was validated through a pilot test with five lecturers to ensure clarity and reliability, with minor adjustments made to improve question phrasing based on their feedback.

Data Collection Procedure

Surveys were distributed to participants during their free time at the university. Before participation, the purpose of the study was explained in detail, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was assured to ensure confidentiality. Participants provided written consent, and the surveys were completed within approximately (10) minutes during a scheduled session.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical standards of research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured that their responses would remain anonymous.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Table1

1. Syntax is my favorite subject to teach.	Strongly agree	Neutral	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	8	6	5	3	1
	35%	26%	22%	13%	4%

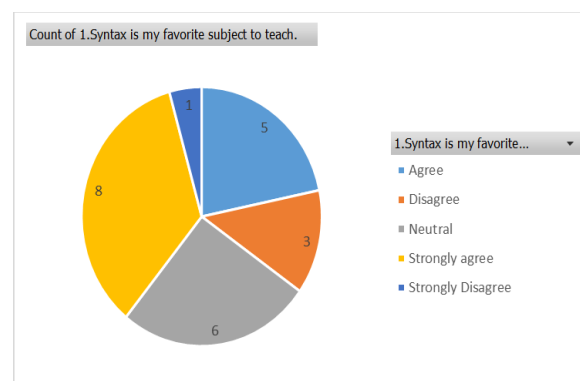


Table 1 shows that most participants believe that syntax is their favorite subject to teach. Syntax skills allow people to understand how sentences function, including the meanings behind the arrangement of words, structure, and punctuation.

Table2

2.Students find syntax easy to understand.	Strongly agree	Neutral	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	1	8	5	7	2
	4%	35%	22%	30%	9%

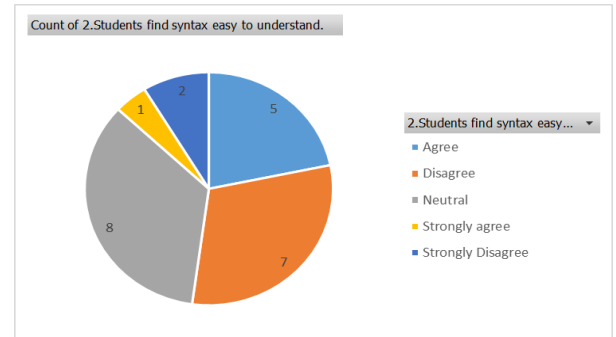
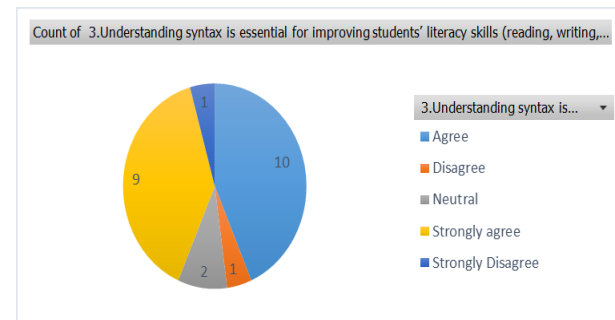


Table 2 shows that participants (35%) are neutral and seem uncertain.

Table3

3.Understanding syntax is essential for improving students' literacy skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening).	Strongly agree	Neutral	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	9	2	10	1	1
	39%	9%	44%	4%	4%

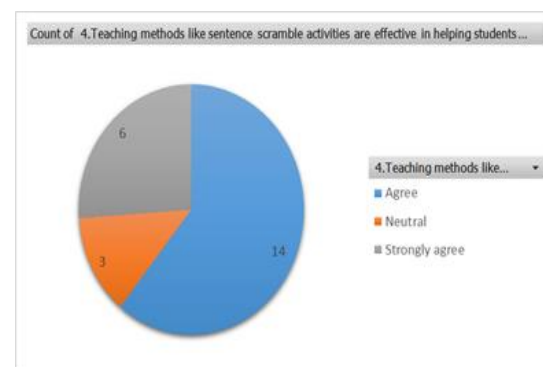


The findings indicate that most participants about (44%) agree that understanding syntax is essential for improving students' literacy skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening).

Table4

4.Teaching methods like sentence scramble activities are effective in helping students learn syntax.	Strongly agree	Neutral	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	6	3	14	-	-
	26%	13%	61%	-	-

Table 4 shows that most



of the participants (61%) agree that the Teaching methods like sentence scramble activities are effective in helping students learn syntax.

Table5

5.Exercises such as Tree Diagrams and Analytical Grammar programs help students understand syntax in depth.	Strongly agree	Neutral	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	8	1	13	1	
	35%	4%	57%	4%	

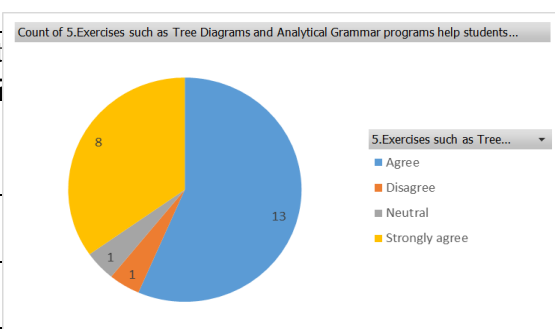
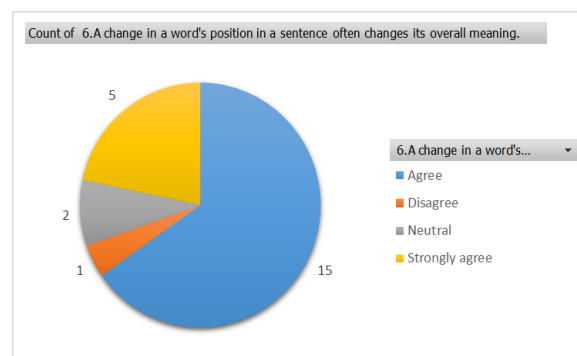


Table 5 clearly shows that most participants (57%) agree that exercises such as tree diagrams and analytical grammar programs help students understand syntax in depth.

Table6

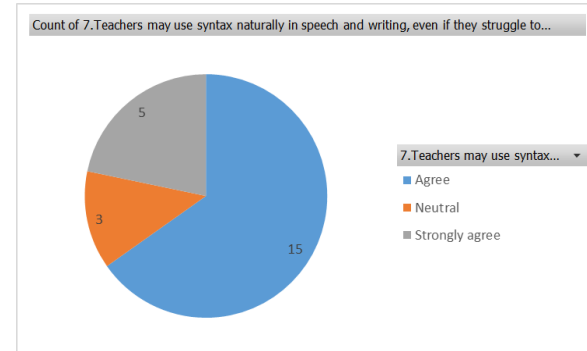
6. A change in a word's position in a sentence often changes its overall meaning.	Strongly agree	Neutral	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	5	2	15	1	-
	22%	9%	65%	4%	-



The results reveal that the majority of participants, about (65%), believe that a change in a word's position in a sentence often changes its overall meaning.

Table7

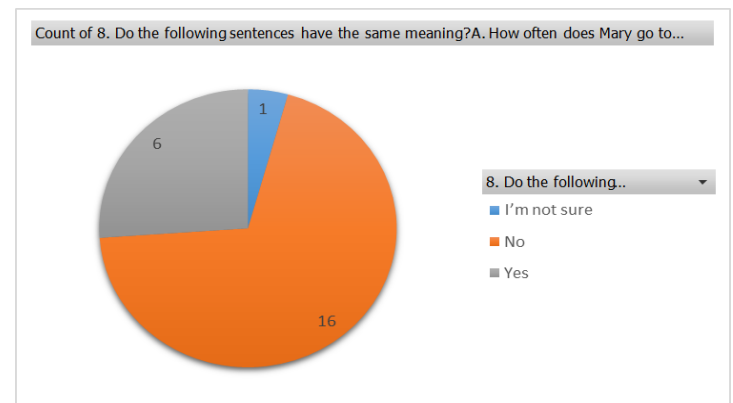
7. Teachers may use syntax naturally in speech and writing, even if they struggle to define it explicitly.	Strongly agree	Neutral	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	5	3	15	-	-
	22%	13%	65%	-	-



The results indicate that the significant number of participants, about (65%), agree that teachers may use syntax naturally in speech and writing, even if they struggle to define it explicitly.

Table8

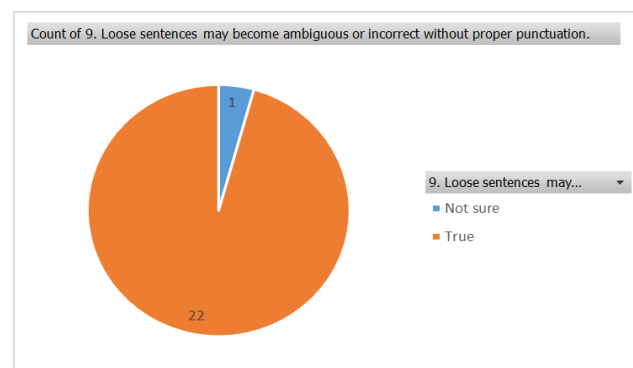
8. Do the following sentences have the same meaning?	Yes	No	I'm not sure
A. How often does Mary go to London.	6	16	1
B. How does Mary often go to London.	26%	70%	4%



According to the results, most of the participants, (70%), believe that the two sentences do not have the same meaning, which is a good sign of understanding the syntactic usage.

Table9

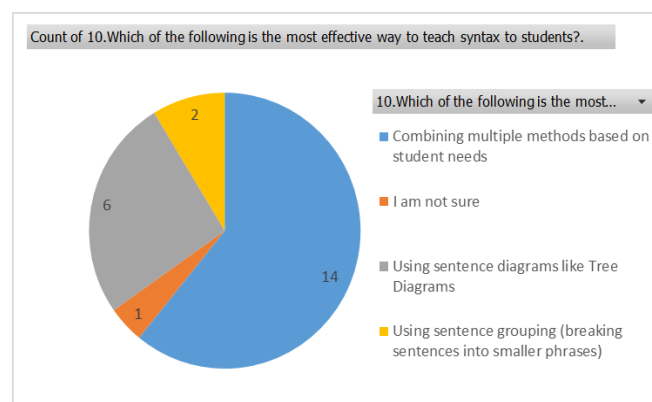
9. Loose sentences may become ambiguous or incorrect without proper punctuation.	True	False	Not sure
	22	1	-
	96%	4%	-



The results indicate that a significant number of participants, (96%), believe that Loose sentences may become ambiguous, or incorrect without proper punctuation.

Table10

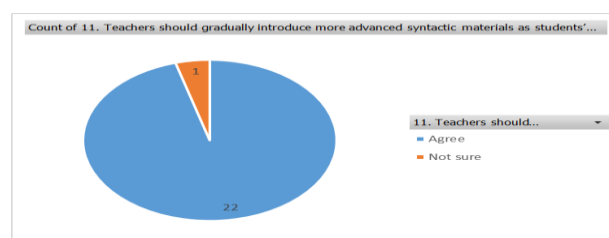
10. Which of the following is the most effective way to teach syntax to students?	Using sentence grouping (breaking sentences into smaller phrases)	Using sentence diagrams like Tree Diagrams	Combining multiple methods based on student needs	I am not sure
	2	6	14	1
	9%	26%	61%	4%



The results reveal that most participants, (61%), find that the most effective way is to teach syntax to students by combining multiple methods based on students' needs.

Table11

11. Teachers should gradually introduce more advanced syntactic	Agree	Disagree	Not sure
	22	-	1

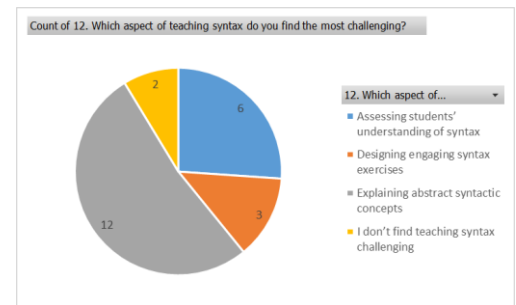


materials as students' skills improve.	96%	-	4%
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The table shows that most participants, (96%), agree that the teachers should gradually introduce more advanced syntactic materials as students' skills improve.

Table12

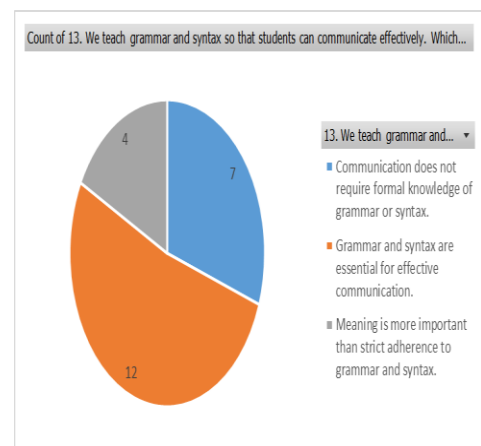
12. Which aspect of teaching syntax do you find the most challenging?	Explaining abstract syntactic concepts	Designing engaging syntax exercises	Assessing students' understanding of syntax	I don't find teaching syntax challenging
	12	3	6	2
	52%	13%	26%	9%



The findings indicate that most participants, (52%), find that the most challenging aspect of teaching syntax is explaining abstract syntactic concepts.

Table13

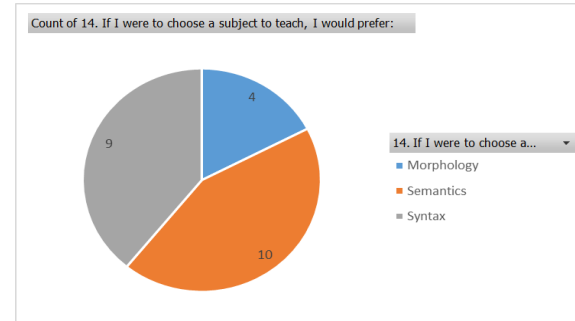
13. We teach grammar and syntax so that students can communicate effectively. Which statement aligns most with your opinion?	Grammar and syntax are essential for effective communication.	Meaning is more important than strict adherence to grammar and syntax.	Communication does not require formal knowledge of grammar or syntax.
	12	4	7
	52%	17%	30%



The table shows that most participants, (52%), agree that they teach grammar and syntax so that students can communicate effectively, and that is necessary for effective communication.

Table14

14. If I were to choose a subject to teach, I would prefer:	Syntax	Semantics	Morphology
	9	10	4
	39%	44%	17%



The results indicate that a significant number of participants, (43%), believe that if they were to choose a subject to teach, it would semantics.

Table15

Open-Ended Question:	Responses
15.What are the biggest challenges you face when teaching syntax, and how do you address them?	The biggest challenge is when students have little or no background about Syntax. So, I have to start from scratch.
	Nothing
	Teaching students how to integrate a variety of sentences. More practice and conceptual understanding help navigate the challenge.
	Most students are unable to draw accurate diagrams to analyze components of sentences.
	Teaching a complex sentence that has more than one meaning to students with limited language or limited exposure to it.
	"Many students find difficulty because English is not their mother language.
	More practice can simplify the problem
	Transfer from Native Language
	I have not taught syntax before, but I taught grammar. I remembered enjoying learning about syntax as it is more like puzzle solving or jigsaw pieces put together. The challenge I faced when teaching grammar is that sometimes L2

adult students don't have the same grammar concept in their mother tongue (they cannot relate to the already established schemata). Once L2 adult learners let go of their adherence to the already established schemata and are more open to establishing new concepts (i.e. establishing new neural pathways in their brain), the learners will more likely be able to grasp new L2 grammatical concepts.

"One of the biggest challenges in teaching syntax is helping students move from seeing language as intuitive to analyzing it systematically. Many struggle to grasp abstract concepts like hierarchical structures or rules that differ from natural usage. To address this, I ground abstract ideas in relatable examples, use visual aids like tree diagrams, and encourage hands-on practice with sentence breakdowns. Patience and connecting theory to real-world language use make syntax more accessible and engaging.

"

Some ambiguous structures

Explaining the rules

The ability for youth to use syntax with grammar correctly

Help students to discuss, analyze and understand syntactic concepts

I think interferences between native language and English. I can address it by showing concrete examples and using tree diagrams.

Teaching syntax through teaching methods makes it easy for the students to understand.

Language barriers

Weakness of students

The biggest challenges in teaching syntax include its abstract nature, students' limited grammar knowledge, and interference from native languages. Teachers can address these by using visual aids, reviewing basic grammar, and relating syntax to real-life examples.

Syntactic structure by Noam Chomsky needs intensive interpretation to teach it properly.

Conclusion

Previous research has focused on the foundational elements of grammar that construct simple sentences, gradually progressing to complex sentence structures, with an emphasis on achieving clear and accurate meaning. This study highlights the importance of understanding both surface and deep structures in syntax to ensure effective communication and comprehension. To this end, the Tree-Diagram method was employed as a tool to clarify sentence structures and reduce ambiguity.

While some sentences may be grammatically and syntactically correct, they can still lack meaning, hindering readers' understanding. Therefore, it is essential to integrate syntax and meaning cohesively to create unified, meaningful structures. Without this integration, learners are likely to struggle with comprehension and resort to guessing the intended meaning.

Recommendations

- Introduce syntax concepts incrementally, beginning with simple structures before progressing to more advanced ones to avoid overwhelming students.
- Scaffold tasks, are recommended when needed, by giving clues and hints to assist students move forward steadily, but firmly.
- Promote collaborative learning by encouraging students to work in pairs or groups to address syntax-related challenges.
- Incorporate sentence elaboration activities to help students develop and manipulate a broader range of vocabulary within sentence structures.
- Provide step-by-step explanations of sentences, whether oral or written, to effectively convey ideas and ensure clarity.
- Drawing tree diagrams could be delayed until students fully comprehend the syntactic matter required.

Acknowledgement

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Appendices

Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed for teachers and focuses on their perspectives and practices related to teaching syntax. It consists of three sections: Likert-scale questions, multiple-choice questions, and one open-ended question.

Part 1: Likert-Scale Questions

1. Syntax is my favorite subject to teach.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

2. Students find syntax easy to understand.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

3. Understanding syntax is essential for improving students' literacy skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening).

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

4. Teaching methods like sentence scramble activities are effective in helping students learn syntax.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

5. Exercises such as Tree Diagrams and Analytical Grammar programs help students understand syntax in depth.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

6. A change in a word's position in a sentence often changes its overall meaning.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

7. Teachers may use syntax naturally in speech and writing, even if they struggle to define it explicitly.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Part 2: Multiple-Choice Questions

8. Do the following sentences have the same meaning?
- A. How often does Mary go to London?
- B. How does Mary often go to London?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ I'm not sure
9. Loose sentences may become ambiguous or incorrect without proper punctuation.
- ☐ True
 - ☐ False
 - ☐ Not sure
10. Which of the following is the most effective way to teach syntax to students?
- ☐ Using sentence grouping (breaking sentences into smaller phrases)
 - ☐ Using sentence diagrams like Tree Diagrams
 - ☐ Combining multiple methods based on student needs
 - ☐ I am not sure
11. Teachers should gradually introduce more advanced syntactic materials as students' skills improve.
- ☐ Agree
 - ☐ Disagree
 - ☐ Not sure
12. Which aspect of teaching syntax do you find the most challenging?
- ☐ Explaining abstract syntactic concepts
 - ☐ Designing engaging syntax exercises
 - ☐ Assessing students' understanding of syntax
 - ☐ I don't find teaching syntax challenging

13. We teach grammar and syntax so that students can communicate effectively. Which statement aligns most with your opinion?

- Grammar and syntax are essential for effective communication.
- Meaning is more important than strict adherence to grammar and syntax.
- Communication does not require formal knowledge of grammar or syntax.

14. If I were to choose a subject to teach, I would prefer:

- Syntax
- Semantics
- Morphology

Part 3: Open-Ended Question

15. What are the biggest challenges you face when teaching syntax, and how do you address them?
