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Kadazandusun Learners' Perceptions toward Elements that Make Grammar Instruction Effective

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ABSTRACT

The paper reports the results of a qualitative study on the perceptions of learners of Kadazandusun (KD) as a less commonly taught foreign language in Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) toward factors that make grammar instruction effective. Data were collected through face to face interviews with 10 learners who had completed their KD course in three levels. Using thematic analysis, three major themes in the learners' perceptions namely, fun activities, user-friendly textbooks/modules and teacher factors were revealed. The implications of the findings on teaching and learning are also discussed in this paper.

Keyword: less commonly taught language, grammar, teaching

Introduction

Not much has been written on grammar instruction for the less commonly taught foreign language (LCTFL), and teachers often find themselves groping in the dark about what works and what does not work when it comes to grammar teaching. Kadazandusun (KD) is one such example. KD, being a LCTFL which is currently only taught in Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), Malaysia, means that teachers face a huge task of designing and developing teaching and learning materials to be used in the classroom. The decision on what aspects of KD grammar to include, or what approaches of language teaching and learning to be utilised is something that the material developer has to make. This paper is a result of an effort to develop grammar modules for KD language. Three modules were written for the three levels of KD as a foreign language course. The modules were introduced in the classroom for students of 2011/202 intake, and when they had finished the third level in 2012, I conducted an interview to elicit their perceptions on what makes grammar instruction effective. This paper is the result of the learners' responses in the interviews, which is hoped to illuminate understanding on the area of grammar teaching and learning for LCTFL.

Literature Review

In discussing the role of grammar instruction, it is beneficial to understand the aims of the language classroom which is to teach the learner not only the language, but also communicative competence, and socio-cultural competence (Kanda & Beglar 2004, Zamar 2008). Nunan and Lamb (2001) summarise the nature of language teaching and learning in terms of theory of language, theory of learning, objectives, syllabus, activities, role of learner, role of teacher and role of materials.

Early theory of language learning centered on the belief that language is a system of rule-governed structures which are hierarchically arranged, and in order to learn a language effectively the learner has to be drilled. Kanda and Beglar (2004) propose four points about grammar instructional practice:

> "1) teach form-function relations, 2) compare related forms, 3) promote learner autonomy, and 4) provide opportunities for generative use"
>
> (Kanda and Beglar, 2004: 3)

The traditional language classroom often engaged in drills, repetition and memorization, in which the teacher had full control over the learner. As opposed to the traditional classroom, the more influential theory of language teaching and learning in this era is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), in which language is believed to be a system of meaning expression; its primary function is for interaction (Nunan & Lamb 2001, Hu 2012). Although the trend of language teaching and learning has been towards CLT (Brumfit 1984, Borg 1998, Nunan and Lamb 2001, Beglar & Hunt 2002), debates on the role and method of teaching grammar in the classroom are still going on (Ellis 2006, Nasaji & Fotos, 2004)

Beliefs and Perceptions on Grammar Teaching

Studies on belief and perceptions may shed light into teachers and learners thinking processes and attitude towards language learning (Borg 1998, Davis 2003, Lightbown et. al. 2006). Borg (1998) summarises teachers' pedagogical belief system as inclusive of beliefs about students, themselves, the subject matter, teaching and learning, curriculum, the school/institution, the teacher's role, materials, classroom management and instructional activities. Researchers like Farrel & Lim (2005), and Phipps & Borg (2009) observe that teachers' beliefs are not always practiced in the classroom. For instance, Phipps & Borg's (2009) study on EFL teachers in Turkey revealed that even though teachers claim that letting learners discover grammar rules is best, observation on their practices showed that they teach grammar rules instead. Loewen et. Al. (2009) state that there are diverse beliefs on grammar instruction among ESL and foreign language learners.

Incecay & Dollar (2011) found out in their study that Turkish ESL learners believe that grammar instruction is an important part of English teaching, and that it should be taught in communicative ways. In line with this, Brown's (2009) study on the perceptions of teachers and students on grammar teaching in the University of Arizona revealed that students prefer grammar-based approach, while teachers prefer CLT approach. Sogutlu, E. and Veliaj-Ostrosi's (2015) study on Albanian learners' perception about grammar revealed that a vast majority of their respondents perceive grammar to be very important in learning a foreign language. A similar study in on pre-service student teachers in Oman showed that they have a positive attitude toward grammar teaching and generally prefer implicit grammar instruction (Nagaratnam & Al-Mekhlafi, 2013).

Along the same vein, Yoon et al. (2004) conducted a study on the beliefs of eight English learners from Korea, China and Japan in Canada. According to them, the three countries have a few things in common with regards to English teaching and learning: "following textbooks, test-oriented, memorizing, focus on reading, a lot of grammar instructions and few speaking chances" (146-147). All of the learners viewed passive grammar learning negatively. This implies that more interactive, communicative way of teaching might be preferable to learners.

Method

The study has been an attempt to find out the learners' perceptions on the factors that make grammar teaching effective based on the three KD grammar instruction modules. It

attempted to answer the following research question: What are the factors that Kadazandusun learners perceive as essential in making KD grammar instruction effective?

Data were elicited from interviews with 10 voluntary participants consisting of learners of KD for three semesters who had just completed their final semester. The total number of students for KD language for the batch was 125. All of the learners came from various faculties in UMS, and took KD as a foreign language (or additional language) as a fulfilment of their language credits requirement. They were given the choice to answer either in English or Malay, the language of instruction in Malaysian schools.

The recorded interview data of the 10 participants were transcribed and analysed for themes. Braun and Clarke's (2006) guides to analysing data thematically was utilised for this analysis. The Malay responses relevant to the research question were translated into English.

Results

Learners' Perceptions of Factors that Make Grammar Instruction effective

Three themes on the factors that make grammar instruction effective were discovered from the interviews. These are fun activities, user-friendly textbook/modules and teacher factors.

All ten learners who participated in the interview described that the most effective phases of their learning took place when the lessons were fun. The learners quoted language games, songs, slides, and video projects as the sources of fun in learning the language.

Games
In the present study, the learners felt that the games were fun because even though there were several grammar items revised in the games, there were so much laughing that the dryness of the subject was forgotten. Besides, the competitive nature of the game made them feel like they had to win, and thus strived hard to remember everything they had learned in order to reap the reward for the winners. Annie, P1, relates her experiences:

> "There is this particular game, I can't remember what you call it. The lecturer divide(d) us into teams. Then the lecturer asked us to choose a number for each round. The number represented the mark for the question. The easier the question, the lower the marks. If we dared to pick a higher number, the question got difficult but that's how to win the game. It was really fun. A lot of revision in the questions...vocab, pronoun, voice system, what else ya...the *penjodoh bilangan* [measure words]. It really helped in learning KD." (Annie, P1)

The game that most of the learners referred to in the interview had been based on the popular TV series 'Double Jeopardy'. In that game, learners can choose their questions based on the marks. The higher the marks, the more difficult the questions are. If they answer correctly, they get the marks, but if they don't, they lose them, and other groups have the chance to try to answer for half the original marks. The game can be used in many ways to review many aspects of the language learned.

Chen and Yang (2013) conducted a study on the impact of video games on English as a foreign language college learners in Taiwan. The results of the study revealed that the game managed to enhance their language skills and motivation. In this regard, according to Yip and Kwan (2006), well-designed drill and practice games are beneficial to learners.

Songs

The following excerpts report the learners' comments on the use of songs as a fun element in the classroom. Generally, they found that the use of songs in the modules helped to increase their interest. Learners state that the songs had nice, relaxing rhythm and repetitive words which helped in memorizing the vocabulary and in understanding the sentence structures. One learner states that in one of the activities, in which they were required to write a song, he felt that he understood the sentence formation process more and it helped him in learning the grammar.

[We love composing songs the most. First, it helps in forming sentences, then we find the meanings. So it automatically makes us understand the sentences one by one] (Azmi, P3)

Low states that the songs used in class helped in learning words, and the culture of the speaker community, although not in learning grammar:

"Then in Module 2- a different lecturer introduced us to songs. After one (each) song, there is an explanation of the word meanings and cultural aspect. I don't find the songs very helpful in learning grammar because to learn grammar you need complete structures…sentences. I remember Fabian William's songs the most. His songs have themes like culture, life in as a farmer and things like that. It is easy to relate to it." (Low, P10)

In this regard, Crowther (2011) believes that songs have multiple effects on learning including aiding memorization, helping students to relax, as well as engaging them.

Slides

Another source of fun that learners cited in this module is the slides. They state that slides is an important aspect of the module. The slides contain pictures that reflect the items being learned. Brock and Joglekar (2011) report the results of their study on the use of PowerPoints in the classroom which found out that the effects varied depending on the teacher's teaching style. However, general patterns include slides serve as memory aid and a tool to convey complex ideas compactly. These points arise in the responses of the interview participants too. Some of the learners stated:

"The teacher has explanation and exercises on the module textbooks. But when the teacher comes to the classroom, the teacher uses slides with a lot of interesting pictures. So when the teacher explains using the pictures, I can see how the grammar works. Like when the teacher showed a picture of a cat, there is the KD word for it there. So I straight away remembered. And the sentences, if there is a sentence in Actor Voice (AV), the teacher highlights the focus with a picture. For example, "the dog chases the cat" (*Momogusa i tasu di dungau*-the dog chases the cat) in AV sentence type, the focus is on the dog. The teacher always say THE DOG stands out. The colour is bolder than the cat. Then I remember it is the focus in that voice. For undergoer voice (UV), "the dog chases the cat" (*gusaon di tasu i dungau*), the focus shifts to THE CAT. Now the cat stands out, its colour is bolder than the dog. So that's how I remember" (Annie, P1)

"Slides are very effective. I find the explanation more comprehensive because you break the grammar explanations into small components. So it's helpful that it is cut into smaller chunks instead of one long paragraph." (Low, P10)

The colourful slides attract learners, as stated by Joan, P4:

[Some people say if we use colours we will remember, madam. Like us, if we look at slides with pictures, we will be attracted to look at them] (Joan, P4).

Video Project

Finally, video-project which is part of the activity in module 3 is cited as a fun activity. The project requires students to form a group of 5 or more students, and come up with a video at the end of the semesters based on one of the weekly themes they learned. The learners are free to interpret the theme and narrow it down, enough to produce a 10 to 15 minute video. They are given full freedom to present their video in the form of drama, documentary or anything that they feel suitable. The main feedback from the learners is that the video project help them to learn new vocabulary and sentence structures which they obtained from their native speaker friends. It is also seen as an opportunity to review and apply all the grammar knowledge that they have acquired in the three levels of learning. In addition to that, they think the project helps a lot in improving their pronunciations. It is fun because they get to work with friends. An examination of peer assessments of videos in Taiwan, in Huang (2015), showed that they promoted peer learning and encouraged self-reflection.

According to Annie, P1:
" The video project... The teacher assigned us into groups. I enjoyed my group. There is X, which (whom) I am used to work together with from Polytechnic. So it's extra fun. When we did the video, we had to write the script. It's like we are forced to do revision...in a fun way. We had to go through the modules from level 1, 2 and 3 to find vocabs and to see how to say things in KD (laugh). When you memorize sentences without understanding them, it is very difficult to use them. But in the video project, you have to act out, use the sentences, so you memorize and really understand how you should use it (them). And then after the video project, you have learned some new vocabs, some new grammar (expressions), how to use them..." (Annie, P1)

[What I have learned is, I could apply whatever I learned in the three levels of KD learning. I could apply my knowledge, speaking in Dusun, and grammar...all those. I could get along well with my friends...those friends have been with me since level 1. We promised to go up to level 3 together...So the chemistry is there and the thing taught us a lot on cooperation, helping each other and this course, this Kadazandusun, helped me a lot in finding friends from other courses, faculties. Even though we differ, we had chemistry..." (Azmi, P3)

User Friendly Modules

The participants were asked to evaluate the grammar learning modules for KD levels 1, 2 and 3. The responses yielded a variety of comments, but a general theme that arose from the comments is 'User Friendly'. The sub-themes of that are varied activities which include pair/group works, individual activity, games and video projects. In this section only group works and individual activities will be discussed in details, as games and video

projects have been discussed earlier under the sub-section 'fun'. Other sub-themes include the use of translation to facilitate learning and familiar topics. Finally, the participants also think that the levels of difficulty of the lessons and activitie in the modules are in progression, thus, appropriate.

Varied activities and teaching aids

One factor that seems to affect the learners' evaluations of the three level modules is varied activities and teaching aids.

Pair/Group Work

Of all the activities, most of them prefer group or pair work. This is evidenced in the responses given by P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, and P10. The participants who prefer group works cite several reasons. One of them is that in group, they can combine their thoughts to tackle the tasks given. They learn to handle the tasks independently, and in the process, acquire new skills like time management, and dealing with difficult people. When the group members connect with each other, the language tasks given become easy to do and more fun. Thus, it increases the level of interest of the learners. In group, the learners also feel that they have ample opportunity to practice the language with their friends without feeling conscious of making mistakes. They are also able to ask for their group members' help in aspects that they are unsure of. Some of the participants' responses illustrate the points:

> [To me groupwork is very important in learning but everyone in the group must cooperate. If they don't cooperate, it is very troublesome. But if they do, if everybody gives their commitment, it becomes the best. It helps us, for example, in improving our speaking skill because we need to speak often. Even in learning English, if we know the grammar, the vocabulary, but we don't practice speaking it, we won't be able to speak fluently. So if we often practice speaking in group, our skill will improve.] (Marzan, P6)

The downside of groupwork as mentioned by P6 above, is when not every team member cooperated. The same problem is also noted by P1, and P10. They noticed that some of the members tend to be 'sleeping partners'; 'free riders' who depended on other people to do the group tasks. That caused a great problem because the other group members who did the job felt taken advantaged of. However, all the participants who experienced the problem say that they were able to handle it and still prefer group work as part of the learning activity.

Individual Activities

Some learners seem to prefer individual activities than pair or group activities. P2, P6, P9 and P10 express this preference, although in P6's case, he prefers both individual and group works but for different activities. The reasons cited by the three participants are first, discussing in group most of the time do not help as the group members tend to revert to their own native language if they are from the same ethnic group. This result in ineffectiveness in learning KD. Doing things individually also ensures that there will not be any clash of ideas, so it is easier. P6 states:

> [But it depends on the activities. For example, in doing assignment (writing) it is better be done individually because it is easier. There's no clash of ideas. Have to do

it on my own to be ok. For speaking test, it is better done in a group...speaking or listening]   (Marzan, P6)

P10, Low also expresses the same preference:
"I prefer to work alone because in the team there are the good ones, the not so good ones, and the really bad ones. The good ones do 90% of the job, from planning to everything. The bad ones take the credit…the same credit as the good ones. That's the thing I don't like. When it comes to a good team when everyone shares responsibility, then it is very good. But there's always a person who is dominating, wants everyone to take their ideas. Or the bad ones who refuse to contribute. They will think that "there are many people in my group, so it's ok if I don't do it". The good ones will take care of it." (Low, P10)

Translation
Translation is cited as another reason that the students can learn effectively from the modules. The students view translation as an important part of the module to help them understand the meaning of words, as well as the sentence structures. Qian, P9, related this:

"Translation is important because of the structural (structures). The translation can help me understand the sentence structures. I can see how the different sentence structures, AV, UV, GV work. I like to analyse the sentences, to find out whether it is UV, GV or AV. So I look at the sentence and try to identify the focus based on the voice. Then I look at the translation to make sure I get it right." (Qian, P9)

Basically, all the participants find translation of the KD texts in the module very helpful in aiding their learning either to understand the words, sentences or the explanation on the language itself.

Familiarity
A majority of the participants commented that certain aspects of the modules make it easy for them to follow the lessons. One of the area perceived to be familiar is the topics. Annie, P1reported:

"In the first level, I like the article (theme) called "Hobby"/ Kaananangan. It's about something *menanam (mananom)- planting, mamagambar-photography* and there's another one, fishing. It's (they are) something related to my daily life. Then also texts in level 3 about travel, *tomu*(open market)...I feel that it's very related to us in Sabah. There's a lot of plants, *tomu*. Most of the texts are familiar and I like them." (Annie, P1)
Another familiar aspect that some learners find useful is the similarity of KD to their own mother tongue or Malay, the official language in Malaysia. Even though the familiar aspect is vocabulary, it makes the learner feel confident to learn the grammar.

[It (KD) differs a lot (from my mother tongue) but there are similarities like numbers. Like the number nine, *siam* in KD. I am a Bajau, and nine is also *siam* (in my language)] (Azmi, P3)

Appropriate levels of difficulty
Nine of the participants (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, and P10) think that the progression of the modules' levels of difficulty is appropriate. P10, while stating that the

progression of difficulty level is appropriate, made an additional comment that learning in level 1 was difficult for him because he found the teaching style of the teacher somewhat monotonous:

> "Module 1- textbook only, maybe that is the teacher's teaching style. Then in Module 2- a different lecturer introduced us to songs, after one song there is an explanation of the word meanings and cultural aspect. Then there are the slides that explain the grammar. I think that's a very good way of teaching. It makes is much easier to understand, and interesting." (Low, P10)

Some excerpts of the other participants' comments on the appropriate levels of difficulty are presented below:

> "I think the arrangement is good. Module 1, we learned a lot of vocabs- body parts, family members, hobbies. And some texts and basic grammar. In level 2 it goes harder, learn to express feelings and emotions, describe place/room, compare person's characteristics, and give direction. Definitely harder than level 1. Then in level 3 harder with all the accidental actions and difficult grammar." (Annie, P1)

Teacher Factor

Another main theme that arises from the interview is teacher factor. It seems that the learner's positive or negative experience in learning is dependent to a certain extent, on the teacher. Among the factors cited to have a positive impact on the learning are teacher's knowledge, and teacher's practices. Rockoff (2004) found that teachers may affect students' achievements. According to his findings, teachers whose fixed-effects match with students tend to have a positive impact on the students' assessment results.

Teacher's knowledge

One of the reasons cited by the students is teacher's knowledge. According to the students, the teacher's knowledge made a positive impact on their learning. In the students' experience, teachers who had knowledge on the topics (lesson themes), and especially the grammar of the language taught more effectively. They are able to make students understand and enjoy the lesson to the fullest. P3 reports his experience with a teacher that affected his learning positively:

> [I like learning Kadazandusun level 3 the most, because the lecturer is really different from the previous ones. The lecturer's teaching style really differs (from the previous ones). I have to admit, the teaching in level 3 had more impact on me...Like, the lecturer of this level has a more critical approach, that makes us understand. This lecturer explains the grammar properly, they use slides and play games...all of these help a lot)   (Azmi, P3)

From the excerpt above, it can also be seen that the learners prefer certain practices that they feel they can enjoy, or beneficial to them.

The fact that the students prefer certain teachers' teaching style might be due to the match between their learning styles with those teaching styles. Many researchers found that mismatch between teacher's teaching style and learner's learning style result in negative consequences. Among them are, "the students tend to be bored and inattentive in

class, do poorly on tests, get discouraged about the course, and may conclude that they are no good at the subject of the course and give up" (Felder and Henriques, 1995: 22).

Practices

The practices of the teachers are also found to impact the students' learning experience. One of the practices cited by a majority of the participants (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7,) as being effective is repetition. The students feel that the repetition helped them in remembering the lessons, especially the grammar.

"The teacher keeps repeating the voice system every semester. It is very important. Although the sentences are the same sometimes, I forget after having a long break. So when the teacher repeats (it), it is very good to help remember it. I feel like I know. And when the teacher explains and repeats every week, I know how to use it in my writing. Because in the writing, you need to combine a lot of sentence types. AV, UV , GV, accidental action etc. With the repitition, I remember. (Annie, P1)

Another practice that the learners feel had been effective was what had been known as the wordlist/sentence structure drill among KD learners. This drill involves a compilation of wordlist or phrases for the learners to remember either based on certain grammar lessons such as 'question words', or weekly themes such as 'kaadatadaton' (culture). The teacher handed a list for them to remember, and asked questions based on the list in the next lesson. Recalling the activity, a participant states this:

[As for me, I much prefer the activity like in semester 1. Because the lecturer gave a piece of paper with basic sentences in KD such as *"Isai ngaran nu?" "Mantad oku id somewhere"*. I like it because there were questions, we didn't know anything yet. When the lecturer explained then we were able to write and speak. I like such activity] (Hamdan, P6)

Conclusion

The study was limited to the classroom of KD as a LCTFL, but some insights can be garnered from the results. There are a few pedagogical implications for language teachers from these studies. First, it is important for teachers to understand the learners' view on grammar instruction, and the factors that they find helpful in making the teaching and learning effective. Second, teachers should try to diversify their approaches to language teaching, especially grammar instruction, in order to be effective. Third, the learners' perceptions might be affected by various factors such as learning styles. Learners can be encouraged to stretch their learning style so that they are more open to other approaches and optimise their learning.

Future work on the same area of this study is recommended to help researchers and instructors understand the nature of learners' beliefs and preferences on grammar instruction. The research may also be extended on teachers' beliefs in order to minimise mismatches between learners' and teachers' perceptions in the classroom.

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