
Second Language Learners' Beliefs About Grammar Instruction and Error Correction

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Learner beliefs are an important individual difference in second language (L2) learning. Furthermore, an ongoing debate surrounds the role of grammar instruction and error correction in the L2 classroom. Therefore, this study investigated the beliefs of L2 learners regarding the controversial role of grammar instruction and error correction. A total of 754 L2 students at an American university completed a questionnaire consisting of 37 Likert-scale items and 4 open-ended prompts. The quantitative items were submitted to a factor analysis, which identified 6 underlying factors (efficacy of grammar, negative attitude toward error correction, priority of communication, importance of grammar, importance of grammatical accuracy, and negative attitude toward grammar instruction). These factors were then used to investigate differences in beliefs among learners studying different target languages. In addition, themes emerging from the qualitative data were identified. The results indicate that among learners studying English as a second language and those studying a foreign language, there were varied beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction.

LEARNER BELIEFS HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED as an important individual difference variable in second language (L2) learning (Dörnyei, 2005; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003). The importance of learner beliefs lies in the fact that they underlie learner behavior to a large extent (Horwitz, 1988). Grotjahn (1991) argues that learner beliefs are “highly individual, relatively stable, and relatively enduring” (p. 189) and that studying learner beliefs might help explain and predict behaviors

that learners demonstrate when learning an L2. In addition, research indicates that L2 learner beliefs correlate with strategy use, motivation, proficiency (Mori, 1999; Yang, 1999), learner anxiety, and autonomous learning (Kalaja & Barcelos). Furthermore, learner beliefs may influence teachers' classroom activities (Borg, 2003; Burgess & Etherington, 2002), and unrealistic beliefs or misconceptions about language learning can impede the learning process (Sawir, 2002). Compared to the attention given to L2 learners' general language learning beliefs (cf. Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Sawir), there has been less research specifically into L2 learners' beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction in the L2 classroom. Given the importance of this topic for the L2 classroom and the preponderance of opinions from theorists, researchers, and teachers, the present study seeks to investigate the often overlooked beliefs of L2 learners regarding the controversial role of grammar instruction and error correction.

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REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The role of grammar instruction and error correction in the L2 classroom has been an issue of

considerable debate in second language acquisition (SLA) research and theory. This debate can be framed in terms of meaning-focused instruction versus form-focused instruction. Meaning-focused instruction is based on the assumption that, like first language (L1) acquisition, L2 acquisition occurs unconsciously and implicitly. Only the availability of comprehensible input and a low affective filter in the learner are necessary for language learning. Any overt attention to linguistic form is unnecessary, and any corrective feedback is ineffective (e.g., Krashen, 1981; Newmark & Reibel, 1968; Schwartz, 1993; Terrell, 1977; Truscott, 1999). However, counterevidence to the effectiveness of purely meaning-focused instruction has been raised, particularly by the research in Canadian (e.g., Swain, 1985) and Swedish (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1976) immersion programs, which suggests that even after many years of exposure to the target language (TL), L2 learners' production is still grammatically inaccurate. These non-target-like levels of accuracy are attributed to the unavailability of opportunities for learners to notice and practice linguistic forms, suggesting that some type of form-focused instruction is beneficial for successful L2 learning.

Form-focused instruction (FFI) is an umbrella term for "any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form" (Ellis, 2001, p. 1). FFI has been seen as consisting of two broad types: focus on forms and focus on form (Long, 1991, 1996). Focus on forms is characterized by "division of the language according to lexis, structures, notions or functions, which are selected and sequenced for students to learn in a uniform and incremental way" (Klapper & Rees, 2003, p. 288), and by the general absence of a communicative context. In contrast, focus on form constitutes attention to linguistic structures within the context of meaning-focused, communicative activities (Ellis, 2001; Long, 1991, 1996). It may involve the negotiation of meaning, as well as the planned or incidental targeting of problematic linguistic items, often in the form of some type of error correction. Although there is still considerable debate regarding the most effective type(s) of FFI, there is some consensus that it is beneficial, and even necessary, for L2 learners (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002; Gass & Magnan, 1993; Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Loewen, 2005; Long, 1983; Russell & Spada, 2006).

Whereas it is essential to consider theoretical and empirical arguments regarding the feasibility and efficacy of grammar instruction, it is also important to consider teachers' and students' beliefs on the topic. There has been considerable interest in teachers' beliefs about grammar instruction (e.g., Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004; Borg, 2003; Chandler, 1988; McCargar, 1993). One factor that teachers often take into consideration when making decisions related to grammar teaching, according to Burgess and Etherington (2002), is students' expectations and past experience of grammar learning. The influence of student beliefs on teacher behavior provides another justification for the present study.

Learner beliefs, which have been described as learners' metacognitive knowledge about learning (Wenden, 1999), have, in general, received less attention than teacher beliefs. Nevertheless, research in educational psychology revealed that epistemological beliefs (i.e., beliefs about learning) lead to individual differences in learning (cf. Yang, 1999). General beliefs about learning have been shown to be distinct from what learners believe about specific subjects. For instance, Mori (1999) found that language learners' beliefs about general learning and language learning more specifically were independent constructs. She also observed significant correlations between learner belief factors and achievement in a foreign language, the amount of language instruction received, and the perception of the language course.

Interest in L2 learner beliefs was stimulated by Horwitz's (1988) creation of the well-known Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) questionnaire, which triggered the so-called "BALLI studies" (Kunt, 1997, as cited in Horwitz, 1999; Oh, 1996; Park, 1995; Truitt, 1995; Yang 1992, 1999). The BALLI questionnaire has 34 items, which fall into five categories: nature of language learning, difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations. Although the questionnaire primarily investigates learners' general beliefs, there are several items related specifically to grammar instruction, such as Item 20, "Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules" (Horwitz, 1988). Results from the BALLI studies (e.g., Peacock, 2001; Samimy & Lee, 1997) seem to suggest that most learners agree with this statement. The BALLI studies are probably among the first to explore L2 learners'

beliefs about the role of grammar in language learning.

Of the few studies specifically examining L2 learners' beliefs about grammar instruction, the most influential are probably those by Schulz (1996, 2001). In 1996, Schulz studied the beliefs of U.S. postsecondary foreign language students and teachers, from a variety of language classes, about the role of grammar instruction and error correction in language learning. Of the students, 90% thought it imperative to be corrected while speaking in class, whereas only 34% of the teachers thought this to be so, showing some discrepancies between student and teacher beliefs about oral error correction. Despite the discord between teachers and students regarding oral correction, around 90% of teachers and students agreed that errors should be explicitly corrected in written work. In 2001, Schulz replicated the 1996 study with English as a foreign language (EFL) students and teachers in Colombia. Results showed that Colombian students also had a strong belief in the positive role of grammar study and corrective feedback in foreign language learning. In addition, both teachers and students agreed that grammar study was not sufficient, and they felt that real-life communication was also important. Although there were no major cross-cultural differences, it seems that Colombian students and teachers were more inclined toward explicit grammar instruction and correction.

Finally, it should be noted that several other studies have highlighted learners' belief that error correction is important; however, they do not always agree on what type of correction is best. For example, Casciani and Rapallino (1991) found that students believed that error correction in general was essential for language learning, but although most participants agreed with the written correction they were receiving, they were divided on what type of oral correction was best. Similarly, Bang (1999) found that most students felt that oral correction was necessary for language learning, but they disagreed on when and how it should be done. Thus, although students may believe that error correction is essential for language learning, there is no consensus on how this error correction should be implemented.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given the current debate about the roles of grammar instruction and error correction, the current study seeks to explore, in more detail, L2

learners' perspectives on this issue by asking the following questions:

1. What underlying constructs are present in L2 learners' responses to a questionnaire regarding their beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction?
2. To what extent can the underlying constructs of learners' beliefs distinguish L2 learners studying different target languages?
3. What statements do L2 learners provide about grammar instruction?

METHODS

Participants

A questionnaire survey was conducted at Michigan State University (MSU). A total of 754 participants, enrolled in different L2 or foreign language courses¹ at various levels of instruction, completed the questionnaire. As the demographic information in Table 1 shows, participants were studying one of 14 TLs, with English, German, Arabic, Japanese, Chinese, and Spanish being the most frequent, in that order. The learners of Italian and Portuguese were grouped together due to the small sample sizes and by virtue of the relationship between the two languages. Of the remaining languages, Korean, Turkish, Thai, Persian, Nepali, and Urdu are administered by the Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTL) program at MSU. For that reason, and due to the low sample sizes for most of these languages, they have been grouped together and labeled LCTLs for the purposes of this study. All English TL learners were studying in the English Language Center, with over 75% in either fourth- or fifth-year classes. Most foreign language students were in either first- (68%) or second-year (28%) classes, with the remaining 4% in fourth-year (German) classes. A majority of the participants (64%) were L1 speakers of English, with Korean being the next largest L1 group. Overall, more than 45 L1s were claimed by the participants. There was an approximately equal number of male (50.5%) and female students (49.5%). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 62 years, with an average age of 21. Participants' self-rated TL proficiency is shown in Figure 1, which indicates that English and German TL learners rated their abilities the highest; however, no skill averaged above 4 out of 6 for any language. Finally, participants were asked what type of language instruction they had

TABLE 1
Participant Demographic Information

Category	Level	<i>n</i>	%
Target Language	English	157	21.0
	German	140	18.6
	Arabic	106	14.1
	Japanese	97	12.9
	Chinese	80	10.6
	Spanish	78	10.3
	Portuguese	24	3.2
	Italian	24	3.2
	Korean	21	2.8
	Turkish	11	1.5
	Thai	7	0.9
	Persian	5	0.7
School Year	Nepali and Urdu	4	0.5
	ELC	104	14.0
	Freshman	192	25.8
	Sophomore	167	22.1
	Junior	138	18.3
	Senior	102	13.5
	Graduate	28	3.8
Gender	Other	13	1.7
	Male	376	49.9
First Language	Female	378	50.1
	English	484	64.0
First Language	Korean	120	16.0
	Chinese	49	6.6
	Arabic	28	3.7
	Other	73	9.7

Note. ELC = English Language Center, Michigan State University. "Other" includes Afrikaans, American Sign Language, Bambara, Bosnian, Cantonese, Cape Verdean, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Gujarati, Haitian Creole, Hausa, Hebrew, Hindi, Hmong, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Kannada, Kazakh, Lunda-Ndembu, Malay, Mandarin, Nepali, Ojibwa, Polish, Portuguese, Romanese, Russian, Somali, Spanish, Swahili, Swedish, Tagalog, Thai, Turkish, Ukrainian, Urdu, and Vietnamese.

typically received in the past and were currently receiving, with 1 being "no grammar instruction" and 6 being "only grammar instruction." Table 2 indicates that most scores averaged just above 3, with English learners reporting the highest level of previous grammar instruction.

Instrument

A questionnaire was created to elicit learners' responses to statements about L2 grammar instruction and error correction. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: (a) a background

information section, (b) a Likert-scale response (quantitative) section, and (c) an open-ended question (qualitative) section. The quantitative section contained 37 belief-related items, 13 of which were adapted from Schulz's (1996, 2001) studies, and the remaining were created jointly by the researchers through intensive group discussion and extensive onsite piloting with L2 learners and instructors. The items in the quantitative section, included in Table 3, were designed to be eclectic and to cover a range of aspects of grammar instruction and error correction, including questions about grammar instruction in general as well as various aspects in relation to the four skill areas. This broad approach was employed because few empirical studies have investigated the various components of the construct. Finally, 13 questions about learner motivation and general learner beliefs were also included as distractors. These items were removed from all subsequent analyses. The qualitative section contained the following open-ended prompts: *I like studying grammar because...*, *I don't like studying grammar because...*, *I like to be taught grammar in the following ways...*, *I don't like to be taught grammar in the following ways...*

Data Collection

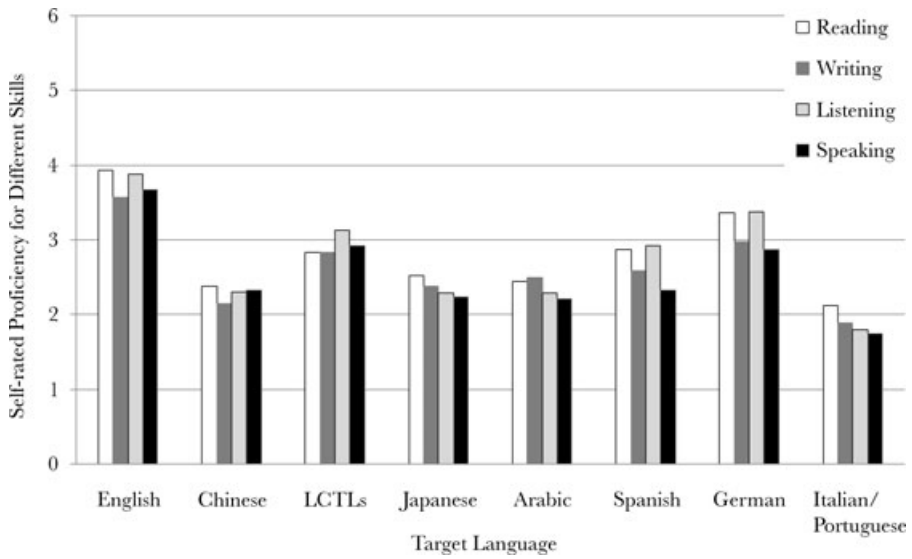
During the middle of the fall semester of 2006, the researchers used existing social networks to contact language teachers and to request permission to invite their students to participate in the study. Individual researchers visited these language classes and distributed questionnaires to the students who agreed to participate. Depending on the preferences of the teachers, participants either completed the questionnaire in class (taking approximately 15 minutes) or completed it at home and returned it to their instructor in class the following day. The questionnaire return rate was 89%.

Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyze the respective sections of the questionnaire; these methods will be presented in turn.

Quantitative Analysis. In order to identify the underlying factors present in the learners' questionnaire responses, the Likert-scale scores for the quantitative items underwent a factor analysis

FIGURE 1
Self-Rated Target Language Proficiency for Different Skills



Note. 1 = beginning level, 6 = advanced.

TABLE 2
Self-Rated Amount of L2 Grammar Instruction

Groups	Current		Past	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
English	3.52	0.07	4.09	0.09
Chinese	3.77	0.08	3.53	0.15
LCTLs	3.68	0.14	3.94	0.20
Japanese	3.97	0.06	3.50	0.11
Arabic	3.94	0.07	3.64	0.09
Spanish	3.78	0.10	3.72	0.13
German	3.69	0.08	3.79	0.09
Italian/Portuguese	3.67	0.12	3.83	0.15

Note. 1 = no grammar instruction, 6 = only grammar instruction; LCTLs = less commonly taught languages.

(Field, 2005). An exploratory factor analysis was chosen because there has been to date no established theory as to what, and how many, factors might underlie L2 learners' beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction. Factor loadings of .30 or greater on the obliquely rotated factor matrix were considered significant. The assumptions of factor analysis were investigated and met.² In addition, the Cronbach alpha for the questionnaire was .84, which indicated sufficient

instrument reliability for conducting a factor analysis (Field).

In order to determine to what extent the obtained factors could distinguish among learners studying different TLs, a discriminant function analysis was performed. Each questionnaire item was assigned to one of six factors, based on the results of the factor analysis, and each learner's average score for each factor was calculated. These factors then served as the dependent variables in the discriminant function analysis, and the TLs studied were the independent variables. The assumptions of discriminant function analysis were investigated and met.³

Qualitative Analysis. To obtain more detailed information about learners' beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction, participants were asked to respond to four open-ended statements about grammar study. The participants' responses to each question were entered into separate electronic databases and were then subjected to a content analysis (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). The content analysis consisted of several iterations. On the first pass, the researchers transferred the data from the paper questionnaire to the electronic file. In the next round of coding, an attempt was made to establish patterns in the data by grouping together closely related items. Finally,

TABLE 3
Rotated Factor Loadings for Learner Beliefs

Item	Factors						h^2
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
<i>I. Efficacy of Grammar</i>							
1. Studying grammar formally is essential for mastering a second language.	.35			.33			.48
2. I usually keep grammar rules in mind when I write in a second language.	.73						.55
3. Knowing a lot about grammar helps my reading.	.87						.67
6. My second language improves most quickly if I study the grammar of the language.	.45					-.38	.52
11. I like studying grammar.	.57						.57
21. The study of grammar helps in learning a second language.	.50						.60
27. Knowledge about grammar rules helps in understanding other people's speech.	.40			.33			.49
32. When I read a sentence in a second language, I try to figure out the grammar.	.67			-.34			.58
37. One way to improve my reading ability is to increase my knowledge of grammar.	.60						.46
<i>II. Negative Attitude to Error Correction</i>							
4. When I make errors in speaking a second language, I like my teacher to correct them.		-.63					.47
8. Teachers should not correct students when they make errors in class.		.71					.61
13. I like to be corrected in small group work.		-.53				-.41	.45
28. I dislike it when I am corrected in class.		.83					.68
31. When I make grammar errors in writing in a second language, I like my teacher to correct them.		-.48					.47
<i>III. Priority of Communication</i>							
7. I can communicate in a second language without knowing the grammar rules.			.57		-.31		.57
22. It is more important to practice a second language in real-life situations than to practice grammar rules.			.85				.72
<i>IV. Importance of Grammar</i>							
16. Good learners of a second language usually know a lot of grammar rules.				.43		-.34	.53
17. Knowing grammar rules helps communication in a second language.	.32			.42			.66
<i>V. Importance of Grammatical Accuracy</i>							
12. People will respect me if I use correct grammar when speaking a second language.					.45		.34
33. I feel cheated if a teacher does not correct the written work I hand in.				-.57	.66		.70
36. Second language writing is not good if it has a lot of grammar mistakes.					.71		.51
<i>VI. Negative Attitudes to Grammar Instruction</i>							
18. I like it when my teacher explains grammar rules.						-.32	.55
23. When I have a problem during conversation activities, it helps me to have my teacher explain grammar rules.						-.52	.52
26. There should be more formal study of grammar in my second language class.						-.75	.56

it was decided to group the responses at a more conceptual level, using more general themes identified from the data. These themes, and accompanying illustrative quotes, are presented in the Results section.

In order to ensure interrater reliability in coding the qualitative data, the individual codings of all seven researchers were validated by a team of three researchers who read through all the coded data. In most cases, the researchers agreed with each other and with the original codings. However, in cases for which there was disagreement among the three researchers, a fourth researcher was consulted.

RESULTS

Quantitative Results

The results of the factor analysis produced six factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, accounting for 55% of the variance. Table 3 displays the factor loadings for the six factors. The first factor, labeled “efficacy of grammar,” contains items that address a variety of ways in which grammar may help students. The second factor is labeled “negative attitude toward error correction” because it contains items addressing error correction. Furthermore, the direction of the factor loadings (positive or negative) indicates that learners agreed with the negative statements (such as “I dislike it when I am corrected in class”) and disagreed with positive statements (such as “I like to be corrected in small group work”). The third factor contained only two items, which were labeled “priority of communication” because both items reflected a preference for using the language rather than focusing on grammar rules. The fourth factor, containing two items, relates to the “importance of grammar.” The fifth factor contains several items that reflect the “importance of grammatical accuracy.” Finally, the sixth factor demonstrates a “negative attitude toward grammar instruction.”

After the factor analysis identified the six factors, average scores for each learner were calculated for each of the factors. Table 4 shows these descriptive statistics. On Factor 1, “efficacy of grammar,” for example, the LCTL learners had the highest score and the English learners had the lowest, meaning that the LCTL learners were the most positive about the role of grammar in L2 learning, whereas the English learners were the least positive.

A discriminant function analysis was performed to investigate how well the six factors (efficacy of

TABLE 4
Target Language Group Mean Factor Scores

Group	Factor					
	1	2 ^a	3	4	5	6 ^b
English	4.3	4.7	4.1	4.5	4.2	4.0
Chinese	4.6	5.1	3.8	4.8	4.6	4.4
LCTLs	4.7	5.2	4.1	4.8	4.5	4.4
Japanese	4.4	4.9	3.6	4.7	4.5	4.3
Arabic	4.6	5.3	3.9	4.8	4.8	4.2
Spanish	4.5	5.0	3.7	4.6	4.4	4.2
German	4.4	4.9	3.9	4.7	4.3	4.2
Italian/Portuguese	4.6	5.1	3.9	4.8	4.3	4.2

^aA lower score indicates a less positive attitude toward error correction.

^bA higher score indicates a more negative attitude toward grammar instruction.

grammar, negative attitude toward error correction, priority of communication, importance of grammar, importance of grammatical accuracy, negative attitudes toward grammar instruction) predicted participants’ TL group membership. Table 5 presents the results of the discriminant function analysis and reveals that two of the functions were significant in predicting group membership and accounted for almost 83% of the total variance.

Table 6 shows the structure coefficient of each predictor variable on the two significant functions (i.e., Function 1 and Function 2). With respect to the first function, Factor 2 (negative attitude toward error correction) and Factor 5 (importance of grammatical accuracy) had the highest loadings. Function 2 had one high loading, namely Factor 3 (priority of communication). These results indicate that participants’ responses to these three factors (2, 5, and 3) serve to differentiate the participants according to TL group.

Table 7 presents the group centroids (the mean function scores for each group), with scores further away from zero representing greater differences, and Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the group centroids. For Function 1, consisting of negative attitudes toward error correction and importance of grammatical accuracy, English learners had the strongest dislike of error correction and the least concern for grammatical accuracy, whereas Arabic learners had the most favorable scores in these areas. In addition, the Chinese and LCTL learners also had fairly strong positive loadings. As for Function 2, consisting of the priority of communication, the Japanese learners had the lowest score, whereas the LCTL learners had the highest. The Italian/Portuguese and English learners also had fairly high

TABLE 5
Summary of Discriminant Functions

Function	Eigenvalue	Wilk's Lambda	Chi-Square	% Variance	Cumulative %	<i>p</i>
1	.10	.85	121	60.8	60.8	.00
2	.04	.94	49	21.9	82.7	.02
3	.01	.97	22	8.1	90.8	.36
4	.01	.98	12	5.0	95.8	.48
5	.00	.99	5	3.0	98.8	.51
6	.00	.99	2	1.2	100	.46

TABLE 6
Factor Loadings on Significant Functions

Factor	Function 1	Function 2
2	.928*	.149
5	.604*	-.229
3	-.178	.774*
6	.316	-.129
1	.385	.194
4	.295	.003

Note. *indicates largest values on each function.

TABLE 7
Functions at Group Centroids

Group	Function 1	Function 2
English	-.46	.16
Chinese	.22	-.07
LCTLs	.27	.34
Japanese	-.08	-.37
Arabic	.56	.06
Spanish	.08	-.11
German	-.15	-.06
Italian/Portuguese	.07	.25

positive scores. These results indicate that Japanese learners were the least likely to prioritize communication over grammar, whereas the LCTL, Italian/Portuguese, and English learner groups were more likely to do so.

To confirm the discriminant function analysis, one-way ANOVAs (with post hoc comparisons) were performed on the three factors mentioned earlier. It was found that on Factor 2 (negative attitude toward error correction), the English learners scored significantly lower than all the other groups. On both Factors 2 and 5 (negative attitude toward error correction and importance of grammatical accuracy), the Arabic learners scored significantly higher than all other groups except the Chinese and LCTL learners. The results for Factor 3 (priority of communication) showed that the English learners scored significantly higher than the Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, and

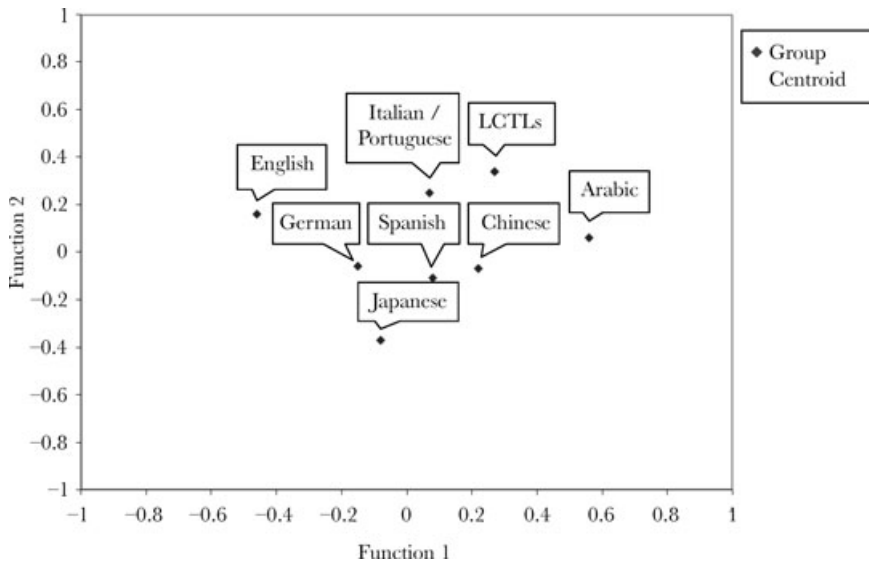
German groups but not the LCTL, Arabic, or Italian/Portuguese groups. Thus, these results help confirm the differences among the TL groups.

Qualitative Results

In addition to the quantitative items, learners were given four open-ended prompts. The themes that were identified for each of the prompts will be presented in turn. In response to the prompt *I like studying grammar because...*, several themes emerged. The first was that many participants felt that studying grammar benefited them in learning a language and that grammar was central to the language learning endeavor; for example, many learners made comments like "It helps me learn the language I am taking" (Arabic) and "Grammar is essential to the mastery of a foreign language" (German). Several unique comments that expressed this idea included the following: "It completes knowledge of a language, you can't make good Mac 'n' cheese without the milk" (Spanish); "Grammar is the formula for the 'math' of any language" (Arabic); and "I feel that grammar is like a 'road map' to learning" (German). In this general category it was also evident that some learners saw grammar as providing a foundation upon which to build their L2 knowledge, through comments such as "I think grammar is the foundation of using English" (English) and "Grammar is the underlying structure that creates meaning" (Chinese).

Whereas many learners commented about the general benefits of studying grammar, others commented that it helped them with specific aspects of the language; for example, many learners, particularly those studying English, commented, "It helps my writing." One learner elaborated by saying, "Whenever I have to write essays, it is important to know grammar otherwise it does not make sense and not a good form of writing" (English). Learners also identified reading, speaking, and listening as other skills that benefited from grammar study. Sometimes this sentiment

FIGURE 2
Canonical Discriminant Functions



was expressed very simply, as in “It helps in reading, listening and speaking comprehension” (Portuguese). However, other learners elaborated a bit more:

It really helps me to understand the second language: for example, when I read the newspaper or magazine which use a lot of contraction form or passive voice, I can understand because I was taught in classes. Moreover, knowing grammar doesn't help me just only reading but also speaking and listening. Since my mother language does not use tense, so if I haven't been taught about tense, I cannot correctly convey my information. (English)

Learners from all TL groups commented on all the various skill areas, but English learners commented most frequently about writing, whereas speaking and listening comprehension were generally the most frequent categories for foreign language learners.

The responses also revealed that learners saw grammar as being beneficial for other, more extrinsic, reasons. Learners made comments like “It is basic for academic success” (English), “It helps me get a better grade” (German), and “I plan on writing and reading scholarly material in this language, and presenting at conferences. Studying grammar will help me with this” (Portuguese). Whereas some foreign language learners made such comments, the majority of these comments were expressed by English learners.

It was also apparent from the responses that some learners enjoyed studying grammar, providing comments such as “It is complicated, but very interesting” (Arabic), “I like seeking and learning patterns” (German), “It is also interesting to explore the many intricate rules of another language, and learn to apply them” (German), and “I enjoy discovering the patterns and learning how language works” (LCTL). Enjoyment of grammar study seemed to be expressed more frequently by foreign language learners than English learners.

Although some learners obviously enjoyed grammar for its own sake, others were less positive, expressing an attitude of having to put up with it because it was beneficial: “I totally don't like studying grammar, but it helps with speaking correctly” (German); “I don't really like it, I just think it's necessary to learn it especially with languages that have lots of grammatical nuances” (Arabic); and, finally, some learners had nothing good to say about grammar study, writing comments such as “I don't like ☹” (English) and “I hate it” (Chinese).

Whereas the first prompt gave participants the opportunity to state what they liked about studying grammar, the second prompt, *I don't like studying grammar because...*, probed the negative aspects of grammar study. In response to this question, the resounding response was “It's boring,” with a full 25% of the learners using that word or a synonym such as “tedious,” “monotonous,”

or “dry,” for example. Other negative descriptors used included “difficult,” “confusing,” and “complicated.” Over half of all learners responded with such negative comments.

Related to these negative comments were other complaints about studying grammar, such as the numerous rules and exceptions to those rules. One learner commented, “There are so many rules and there are always exceptions” (German). The time-consuming nature of studying grammar and the burden of memorization also received some mention, in comments like “It can be time consuming” (Portuguese) and “I am not good at memorization and grammar usually takes a long time for me to feel comfortable with” (Arabic).

Some learners reacted negatively to various aspects of studying grammar, whereas others contrasted grammar study with other aspects of language study that they valued more. For example, several learners reported that they would rather use the time spent on grammar to work on their speaking skills: “I feel like I need to spend more time on speaking the language than grammar” (Arabic) and “Too much is tedious and not as important as learning to speak” (German). However, apart from speaking, not many of the other skills were mentioned.

Other factors reported as contributing to learners’ dislike of grammar included teachers, and grammar’s perceived lack of relation to real life. Comments regarding teachers included “I had bad teacher last semester, and I hate it now” (English) and “I don’t like the way my teacher teaches it to us” (Spanish). In regard to its lack of usefulness outside the classroom, one learner commented “I wonder if I am really going to use this in real life situations” (Arabic).

In spite of these negative comments, there were also individuals who expressed positive or partially positive comments in response to the second prompt. For example, some learners admitted to not liking grammar but recognizing that it was important (similar to the pattern found in the first prompt): “It is a pain in the ass but I know that I need it to succeed in the classroom and actually learn the language” (Spanish) and “It’s pretty boring, but still should be taught” (Italian). Other learners were unreservedly positive: “It is my favorite part of a second language” (Arabic), commented one learner. However, it should be noted that such views were definitely in the minority compared to views that expressed a more negative assessment.

The final two prompts related to learners’ likes and dislikes about different types of grammar

instruction. For the prompt *I like to be taught grammar in the following ways...*, more than 15% of the learners referred to the use of examples, with one learner stating, “Grammar should be taught using many examples from everyday speech” (Japanese). Related to examples was the desire to have explanations provided in grammar instruction: “I want teachers to explain when and where to use it in detail” (English), “. . . with clear explanation and examples” (Chinese). Learners sometimes specified what types of explanations they liked, but often this was done using relatively general terms such as “clear” or “detailed,” which may be interpreted differently depending on one’s perspective.

One theme that emerged in relation to how grammar should be taught was the desire for grammar to be related to real life. Examples related to real life were mentioned by some learners, as were comments such as “Using sentences which are commonly using [sic] in our conversations” (English), “How it is used in context” (Chinese), and “I like to have real world practice” (Chinese).

Games and activities was another theme that emerged from the responses. Numerous learners provided responses such as “A game or an activity where we allow student to help each other” (Arabic) and “Learn grammar rules then practice them with games and activities” (Spanish). In the same vein, learners reported that interaction was important to them, as evidenced in comments such as “Interactive ways: work with a partner” (English) and “Group work, interactive work” (German).

One difference between the English and the foreign language learners was in their views about error correction, with several favorable comments by English learners but no such mentions by foreign language learners: “When I make errors and the teacher correct them for me. I don’t forget them” (English) and “By writing papers, the teacher correct it and explain what is wrong” (English). One possible explanation for this difference could be that many of the English learners were in academic preparation classes, which may have involved more written work.

Another difference between the English as a second language (ESL) and foreign language learners was in the area of practice and speaking. Very few ESL learners reported liking practice or speaking in grammar instruction, but such sentiments occurred relatively frequently in foreign language learners’ responses, particularly among LCTL and Arabic learners: “Practicing out loud with the class or small groups” (Arabic) and “Through practice with speaking” (Japanese).

The final prompt, *I don't like to be taught grammar in the following ways...*, related to learners' dislikes in grammar instruction. One of the themes that emerged in response to this prompt was that learners did not like to be left on their own when studying grammar. This was reflected in several ways. First, it was reflected directly through such comments as "On my own: the teacher leaves it up to you to figure out for the most part" (Spanish) and "Having to find out for myself" (LCTL). Another component of this theme was expressed by learners who responded that they did not like to rely solely on the textbook: "By myself. It is difficult to just read a textbook and learn grammar" (German) and "Textbook only" (LCTL).

Finally, many learners stated that they did not like memorization: "I don't like memorizing grammars" (English) and "To be given a list of grammar rules and then memorizing them" (Japanese). Although all TL groups expressed this sentiment, ESL learners were twice as likely to comment on this issue.

This study has presented a quantitative and qualitative investigation into L2 learners' beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction. The quantitative analysis found six factors in the learners' responses to Likert-scale statements about the topic. In addition, it was found that learners studying different TLs differed significantly in their responses on these factors. The qualitative analysis found that learners liked studying grammar primarily because it helped them "learn the language," but also it specifically helped with writing, reading, and speaking. Again, there appeared to be differences among learners studying different languages. As for reasons why learners did not like studying grammar, the overwhelming consensus was that it is "boring." Learners also reported liking grammar instruction that involved contextualized examples and explanations, as well as activities that required interaction. Conversely, learners did not like to be left on their own to figure out grammar, nor did they like to rely solely on memorization. These results will now be discussed in relation to each of the research questions.

DISCUSSION

As previously stated, the answer to the first research question—What underlying constructs are present in L2 learners' responses to a questionnaire regarding their beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction?—revealed several underlying factors comprising learners' beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction. To our knowledge, no other study has

attempted this type of investigation. The results of the current study suggest that learners have several aspects to their beliefs system that may need to be investigated separately. First, similar to previous studies (Schulz, 1996, 2001), it is clear that the learners valued grammar instruction. However, it was also apparent that not everyone valued grammar instruction equally. Finally, error correction was viewed separately, and somewhat negatively, by the participants. It is interesting to note that learners viewed error correction and grammar instruction as distinct categories, whereas researchers might view error correction as a type of focus on form and, thus, a type of grammatical focus (Ellis, 2001; Long, 1996), reflecting a difference in learners' and researchers' perspectives. This differentiation suggests that future studies investigating beliefs about grammar instruction may want to incorporate this distinction.

In response to the second research question—To what extent can the underlying constructs of learners' beliefs distinguish L2 learners studying different target languages?—it was clear that learners studying different TLs, particularly ESL versus foreign language learners, responded differently to the questionnaire. ESL learners were less convinced about the need for grammar instruction and error correction and were more enthusiastic about improving communicative skills than were foreign language learners. One possible explanation for these differences might relate to the amount of grammar instruction in learners' current or past L2 classes. Because the background questionnaire asked about the amount of current and previous grammar instruction, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted to see if the ESL learners and foreign language learners reported receiving different amounts of grammar instruction. No significant difference was found in the amount of grammar instruction in their current classes, $t(699) = 1.43$, $p = .15$, but there was a significant difference in their past instruction, $t(679) = -4.59$, $p < 0.05$, with ESL learners having received more previous grammar instruction than foreign language learners. Therefore, it is possible that the ESL learners' lower preference for grammar instruction and error correction but greater enthusiasm for speaking was due to greater amounts of previous grammar instruction. The difference in L2 learning backgrounds of the ESL and foreign language learners is highlighted by the fact that 81% of students studying a foreign language claimed English as their L1, whereas 51% of those studying English claimed Korean as their L1, and another 20% claimed Chinese. As Horwitz (1999) noted in her

review of the BALLI studies, Korean EFL learners rejected the primacy of grammar learning more than other groups of L2 learners. Therefore, the fact that learners of different TLs had different attitudes toward grammar instruction and error correction may be, in part, attributable to their different L1 backgrounds and, more specifically, to the language instruction methods in their home countries.

Another possible explanation for the differences in prioritizing either communication or grammar instruction relates to the social context in which the learners are studying the L2 (Siegel, 2003). Because the English learners were living in an English-speaking context, they were more likely to have more opportunities for communicating in the TL, and for this reason, they may have placed a higher priority on such communication rather than on grammar instruction. In contrast, foreign language learners presumably had fewer opportunities to communicate in the TL outside of the classroom, and for this reason, they may have placed less value on communication in comparison to grammar instruction.

A related issue concerns the finding that learners of Chinese and Arabic were more positive about grammar instruction and error correction than were learners of other languages. This difference might be attributable to the fact that these two languages are non-Indo-European languages and are perceived to be more challenging than languages such as German or Spanish (Li & Thompson, 1981; Odlin, 1989).⁴ The learners, who are mostly L1 English speakers, might deem it necessary to receive more grammar instruction in order to acquire the TLs; however, further probing of such learners' beliefs is necessary to address this hypothesis.

In response to the third research question—What statements do L2 learners provide about grammar instruction?—it is clear that learners have their own opinions about studying grammar and, in large part, these statements supported the quantitative analyses. For example, a large number of learners reported that studying grammar was useful for improving their general language ability as well as separate language skills. This is clearly reflected in the first factor from the factor analysis. Furthermore, it should be noted that all of the skills, except for speaking, are represented by items in the first factor. Thus, it seems that learners do not necessarily feel that grammar is useful for just one skill.

Further relationships between the quantitative and qualitative analyses relate to learners' reasons for not liking the study of grammar. This factor

appeared in the factor analysis, and the qualitative analysis showed that learners clearly viewed grammar study as boring.

CONCLUSION

Issues related to grammar instruction and error correction, which include questions of how much focus to place on linguistic forms and how such a focus should be realized in the L2 classroom, have been and will continue to be debated in L2 research (Ellis, 2006). The present study sought to investigate the topic from the perspective of the L2 learner, which is important because previous research has shown that learner expectations play a critical role in determining how teachers treat grammar in the L2 classroom (Borg, 2003; Tomlinson & Dat, 2004) and that teachers' and learners' beliefs may differ.

In addition, the present study has provided an exploration of the underlying constructs involved in L2 learners' beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction. For instance, learners had a general view of the efficacy or usefulness of grammar instruction. However, some learners held negative views of grammar instruction, and still others prioritized communication over grammar. Different TL groups expressed varying beliefs, which may be accounted for, in large part, by their previous language learning contexts.

However, there are some limitations to this study. One of the primary limitations is the nature of the data collection instrument. Although the questionnaire provided useful and interesting information, there is a limit to what such an instrument can tell us. The quantitative items phrased questions in the researchers' terms and required that the learners respond to existing items rather than allowing them to address issues that were meaningful to them. In the qualitative section, the prompts and answers were admittedly short and perhaps superficial. Some learners obviously put more thought into their answers than did others. Furthermore, with the questionnaire, there was no chance to follow up on learners' responses or to clarify meanings. Clearly, more in-depth, qualitative-type interviews and case studies could provide a richer, more detailed picture of learners' beliefs on this topic.

Another limitation of the questionnaire is that it treats learners' beliefs as static and decontextualized. Different individuals may have had different interpretations of questionnaire items (Barcelos, 2003), and because no attempt was made to provide a context or examples of instructional practices, learners may have supplied their own, varied

contexts. Learners might have responded differently if they had been provided with contextual information or asked to describe their own classroom experiences related to grammar instruction and error correction. Future studies might want to combine an observational component with an interview to provide a more contextualized view of learners' beliefs.

In spite of these limitations, this study provides a large-scale snapshot of L2 learners' beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction. The large sample size and the wide variety of the learners' L1 backgrounds add to the robustness and generalizability of the study. In sum, the study provides information about learners' beliefs regarding the ongoing debate around grammar instruction, and it identifies possible areas for future research on this topic.

NOTES

¹ For the purposes of this study, second language refers only to learners of English, whereas foreign language refers to learners of any other language.

² Several assumptions for conducting a factor analysis were investigated. The KMO value and the Bartlett's test of sphericity are often used to determine whether a data set is factorable. The large KMO value (.89) and significant results from the Bartlett's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(666) = 7,247, p < .001$, indicated an acceptable data set (Field, 2005).

³ Discriminant function analysis has several assumptions. First, the dependent variables should be normally distributed within groups. Results from the descriptive statistics showed that data derived from the learners' responses to each question item were normally distributed. Second, the homogeneity of variances and covariances is assumed. Levene's test of equality of variance showed that the p -value for each independent variable was above .05 and Box's test of equality of covariance produced a value below .05, so this assumption was not violated. The third assumption is the independence of observation, and none of the participants was in more than one target language group.

⁴ Chinese and Arabic are rated Category 3 languages ("Languages which are exceptionally difficult for native English speakers") by the Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. Department of State, whereas languages such as German and Spanish are rated Category 1 languages (National Virtual Translation Center, 2008).

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