



Teachers' Perceptions of the Balance Between Grammar and Communication Skills in the EFL Curriculum

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Abstract: This study examines ESL teachers' perceptions of the balance between grammar instruction and communication skills in an international university in Thailand. Although grammar is acknowledged as essential, teachers report that curriculum design, assessments, and parental expectations prioritize grammatical accuracy over communicative fluency. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining a survey of 50 teachers with follow-up semi-structured interviews. Quantitative results revealed that grammar receives significantly more class time, while communicative tasks are constrained by time, large class sizes, and exam-oriented assessment. Qualitative findings highlighted teachers' limited training in communicative methodologies but also their recognition of the benefits of integrating grammar into authentic communication. Overall, the study underscores the needs for curriculum reform, professional development, and assessment realignment to achieve a sustainable balance between grammatical accuracy and communicative competence. These insights inform policymakers, curriculum developers, and teacher educators seeking to enhance EFL learning outcomes.

Keywords: EFL, grammar instruction, communicative competence, teacher perceptions

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Background

The interaction between grammatical instruction and English communication skills as a foreign language curriculum (EFL) remains a pressing concern for educators who strive to improve student learning and language proficiency. Teachers often sail the balance between emphasizing grammatical accuracy and promoting effective communication. This balance significantly influences the way EFLESL students acquire linguistic skills essential for their future academic and professional life .

Research indicates that teachers' beliefs about grammatical instruction deeply shape their pedagogical approaches. For example, Al-Khresheh and Orak (2021) explored global perspectives on the role of grammar in EFL/ESL classrooms, noting that educators recognize grammar as a fundamental element of language learning, but struggle to integrate it perfectly with communicative practices. Teachers express concerns about the possible disadvantages of focusing a lot on

grammatical structures, which can make it difficult for students to get involved in spoken or written communication.

In addition, Tiwari (2023) investigated ESL teachers' beliefs on grammar teaching, revealing a spectrum of attitudes that vary from traditional approaches emphasizing rules and mechanical learning to more contemporary methods that prioritize application in context. This divergence of beliefs emphasizes the varied perceptions between educators about the effectiveness and the need for grammatical instructions in the development of students' communicative competence. Teachers who advocate a balanced approach usually report greater student involvement and better language proficiency, suggesting a synergistic relationship between grammar and communication skills.

Tarigan and Stevani (2022) have noted even more about how English teachers perceive grammatical instructions as instrumental to improve speaking skills. Their study indicated that effective grammatical teaching could enable students to express themselves more confidently and accurately in conversations, thus reinforcing the notion that communication and grammar are not mutually exclusive, but complementary elements in language teaching. The integration of grammar into communicative practices allows students to navigate more effectively in real life, thus increasing their proficiency in English language. Despite growing recognition of the importance of balancing grammatical instruction and communication skills in ESL curricula, there remains a lack of comprehensive understanding of how teachers perceive and implement this balance in their everyday teaching practices. Previous studies have explored teachers' beliefs only broadly, but few have examined the specific challenges and contextual factors influencing how grammar and communication are prioritized within the curriculum at the classroom level.

Moreover, much of the existing research focuses on general teacher attitudes without sufficiently addressing differences related to teaching experience, educational background, or institutional constraints such as assessment demands and class size. This creates a gap in understanding how these variables shape teachers' perceptions and instructional choices, which directly impact student learning outcomes.

Given that teachers are key agents in curriculum enactment, investigating their perceptions provides crucial insights for curriculum developers, policymakers, and teacher trainers to design more effective frameworks that support a balanced approach. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on teachers' perceptions of the grammar-communication balance in ESL curricula and identifying the barriers and enablers they experience. Such research is timely and significant as it can inform targeted interventions to enhance both teacher preparedness and student communicative competence.

Research Question

How do teachers perceive the current balance between grammar instruction and communication-focused activities in the EFL curriculum?

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Balancing Grammar Instruction and Communicative Competence in EFL ESL Curricula

The integration of grammar teaching in communicative skills frames in English language programs is essential to improve language learning results, especially for various student populations. Effective pedagogy recognizes the relationship between grammatical accuracy and functional communication, as pointed out by Roeder et al. (2020), who argue that teacher beliefs on grammar

are often in disagreement with class communication practices. This disjunction calls for educational models which promote a balanced approach, aligning grammar teaching with the principles of teaching communicative languages.

Harun et al. (2019) suggest that concept-based teaching can considerably improve grammatical competence in learners of L2, stressing the importance of contextualized learning experiences which promote both grammatical understanding and communication capacity. This is aligned with Alqahtani's (2022) review of theories underlying grammar teaching methodologies, which highlights the need to integrate theory into practice to meet various learning needs among English language students.

Additionally, Tichachart (2020) says that the explicit teaching of grammar should not be overlooked, pleading for its incorporation into communication practices to enrich the linguistic repertoire of the learner. In the same vein, Numinova (2024) supports this perspective, demonstrating that the communication methods for teaching vocabulary and grammar in the context lead to better retention and better application in real scenarios.

Collectively, these studies underline the theoretical foundations which argue for an integrated approach which harmonizes the teaching of grammar with a communicative competence. This synergy not only improves language learning results but also meets the various needs of learners of English as a second language, promoting an inclusive and effective educational environment.

Teachers' Beliefs and Perceptions About the Role of Grammar in Language Learning

The beliefs and perceptions that teachers maintain in relation to grammatical instructions play a critical role in the formation of their pedagogical approaches, consequently influencing the results of language learning for students. Widagsa et al. (2024) highlight the intersection of the declared beliefs of teachers and their implementations in the classroom, suggesting that the discrepancies between what teachers believe and the way they teach can significantly affect student involvement and grammatical competence. This complexity illustrates that teachers not only have their unique beliefs formed by personal experiences, but are also influenced by educational policies and curricula, which can sometimes lead to tension in classroom practices.

In addition, Alzahrani (2024) explored students' beliefs about grammatical learning, focusing on the perceived importance of various instructional methods. The study indicates that student awareness of the role of grammar in the acquisition of languages can be fundamental in the way they get involved with the subject. When teachers have different understandings of their students' beliefs, they can adapt their instructions to meet student preferences, potentially improving the general learning experience.

The intersection of teachers' beliefs in grammar and their class practices is particularly important in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context, where effective communication skills and grammatical precision are vital for students' success. Saengboon et al. (2022) highlight the multiple roles grammar plays in teaching English in Thailand. The authors argue that the local points of view of teachers deeply influence their perception of grammar as the theoretical framework and a practical competence necessary for effective communication. Various teachers express the conviction that formal education of grammar is essential, often considering it as fundamental to the global linguistic competence of students. However, dependence on traditional approaches to grammar teaching can sometimes lead to disconnection between teachers' beliefs and students' communication needs.

In the context of teaching of communicative languages (CLT), Pitikornpuangpetch and Suwanarak (2021) examine the educational beliefs and practices of Thai educators. Their results reveal a complex relationship between teachers' beliefs on CLT and their real grammar teaching strategies. While many teachers follow the principles of CLT, in particular communication and mastery of CLT, these beliefs are not always delivered to class practices. Often, they come back to the traditional grammar teaching in the face of curricula or students' expectations, which suggests that the perception teachers have towards grammar have considerably influenced their pedagogical choices. This inconsistency indicates a need for professional development that aligns teachers' beliefs on contemporary communicative practices.

In addition, Phisutthangkoon (2021) explores the beliefs and practices of teachers at an EFL university concerning speech education, revealing similar tensions between the theoretical understanding of educators and their practical implementations. The study indicates that teachers often prioritize grammatical accuracy in relation to the control of speech activities, particularly in high-stake assessments. Such priorities reflect underlying beliefs on the importance of grammar in the realization of communicative competence between students. The tension between these beliefs and a more holistic approach to language learning highlights the need for educators to critically reflect on their teaching philosophies and to adopt more integrated educational approaches that appreciate grammar in the broader context of communication.

In short, the beliefs and perceptions of Thai teachers considerably shape their approaches to the teaching of grammar, which has an impact on the experiences of students' language learning. Further research and professional development initiatives are essential to fill the gap between theory and practice, ultimately enriching the English language learning landscape for Thai students. A balanced approach which recognizes the importance of grammar while promoting communicative competence will benefit both teachers and students in the long run.

Petraki and Hill (2010) investigated teachers' beliefs about grammar instruction, the connection between their knowledge and classroom practices, and the theoretical orientations underlying these practices. They found that non-native teachers generally regarded grammar as the fundamental basis for learning English in EFL contexts, while native teachers saw grammar more as a supportive element that ensures accuracy and appropriateness of communication. The researchers suggest that this divergence stems from the fact that non-native teachers rely on grammar to build learners' confidence in contexts where students have little exposure to authentic language input, whereas native teachers treat grammar as an aid rather than a starting point.

Teachers' Perceptions and Attitudes Toward Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Approaches

An increasing set of literature suggests that teachers' perceptions have a significant impact on the implementation of these methodologies, which can either improve or hinder their efficiency in class (Sarikha & Chumworathayee, 2022).

The understanding and application of CLT teachers remain a focal point in the evaluation of its success in Thai educational contexts. According to Sarikha and Chumworathayee (2022), many secondary school teachers who teach English as a foreign language (EFL) recognize the importance of CLT in the promotion of communicative competence between learners. However, there are challenges concerning the transition of traditional grammar paradigms to more communicative practices.

Unlike teaching with emphasis on the communicative competence inherent in the CLT, the teaching of languages based on tasks (TBB) offers a potentially complementary avenue to promote students'

commitment in the acquisition of the language. Jaruteerapan (2020) highlights the emerging understanding of TBB among teachers of Thai students, indicating a change towards the recognition of the effectiveness of tasks-oriented approaches to promote authentic use of languages. This perception is aligned with the evolving educational position prioritizing teaching centered on the learner and a practical linguistic application. TBL integration has been perceived as beneficial to cultivate a more active and participative class environment, allowing students to effectively apply linguistic skills in significant contexts.

Although CLT and TBB advocate communicative competence, there is a disparity in the way educators perceive and implement these approaches. For example, A study by Sundrarajun (2022) presents an innovative application of concepts similar to CLT and TBB in specific contexts, such as an English course for music, revealing how contextualization plays an essential role in training teachers' perceptions. By incorporating culturally relevant materials and tasks, educators can promote a deeper connection with content, thus improving students' commitment and learning results.

In addition, cultural considerations in linguistic education have a significant impact on how teachers receive and implement CLT and TBLT. Bedregal Nateros (2020) highlights the importance of integrating cultural elements into EFL classrooms to support wider communication objectives. This perspective suggests a need for teacher training programs which not only highlight the educational theory but also incorporate cultural components to better prepare educators for the complexity of linguistic education in Thailand.

It is also crucial to consider the changing perceptions of teachers to these modern methodologies. Kalra (2024) maintains that teacher beliefs and attitudes can considerably influence the adoption and adaptation of educational strategies. In the Thai context, resistance to change and dependence on traditional methods can hinder progress towards more dynamic and effective teaching approaches, emphasizing the need for continuous support for educators when navigating this transition.

El Arbaoui (2023) conducted a survey on students and teachers, revealing that both groups expressed positive attitudes toward Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). They felt that integrating this approach, particularly in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), fosters effective teaching and learning by engaging learners in tasks relevant to their academic and professional goals. Consequently, the study recommends implementing TBLT over a sustained period and adapting it to suit the varying abilities of students.

Empirical Studies on EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Grammar and Communication Balance in Curriculum Implementation

The teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Thailand has drawn considerable attention in recent years, in particular because of the current debate concerning the balance between grammar teaching and communicative competence in the implementation of the curriculum. This literature review explores Thai English teachers' perspectives and highlights studies reflecting their experiences and challenges.

Sarikha and Chumworathayee (2022) explored the perception Thai EFL secondary teachers have on the teaching of communicative languages (CLT). Their results indicate that if many teachers recognize the importance of communication in language learning, there is an omnipresent concern regarding insufficient emphasis on the teaching of grammar in the context of the CLT. Teachers expressed the desire for a balanced approach which includes both grammar and communication practices, underpinning the need to integrate formal grammar education into communication

activities. This feeling echoes a common theme in linguistic education, where teachers feel rushed to prioritize master's debit to the detriment of precision (Sarikha & Chumworathayee, 2022).

In addition, recalling the complexities of this balance, Huttayavilaiphan (2024) examined the attitudes of Thai teachers towards teaching English in a culturally diversified setting of a Thai northern university. Although the study mainly focused on the incorporation of various materials, it also enlightened teachers' perspectives on grammar and communication. Many educators have expressed their discomfort with the too normative grammar rules that seemed to be disconnected from the communication of the real world, thus suggesting a preference for a teaching philosophy which emphasizes the use of contextualized grammar in conversation. This prospect strengthens the need for development of the curriculum which incorporates the teaching of grammar in significant communication contexts, allowing the precision and control of the fluidity of coexistence in the learning process.

Khojan and Ambele (2022) studied how Thai EFL teachers use students' mother tongues through translation in classrooms. They found that teachers use translanguaging to clarify grammar, integrating language resources to improve understanding and communication. This challenges the traditional view that separates grammar from communication, supporting a more integrated methodology.

The incorporation of integrated learning strategies based on tasks and gender-based was also explored by Poonpon et al. (2022), which assessed the effectiveness of these methods on the mastery of English among students of Thai rural secondary. Their study revealed that such approaches have not only improved communication skills but also allowed the teaching of grammar to occur naturally in the context of significant tasks. Teachers indicated that students' commitment to authentic communication tasks encouraged them to apply grammatical structures in practical contexts. This observation highlights the potential of educational strategies which reflect real communication demands while responding simultaneously to the rigor of grammar teaching.

Despite these encouraging ideas, Sangnark (2025) raised critical concerns regarding the broader implications of the teaching of English in Thailand. His work has described the challenges facing learners in English, particularly in the context of tourism, where linguistic skills have a direct impact on careers and income of professionals. The limits of the teaching practices of the English language, which can underestimate the teaching of grammar in favor of communication, could prevent professionals from carrying out effective communication in their field. This difference underlines the need to reassess the approaches that teachers adopt to ensure that grammar and communication skills are adequately developed.

The literature presents different perspectives on the way EFL teachers in Thailand perceive the balance between the teaching of grammar and communication in the implementation of the curriculum. Empirical studies systematically reveal the desire for a more integrated approach which addresses both precision and mastery, to meet the real needs of students.

Influence of Institutional Context on Teacher Perceptions, Especially in International University Settings/in a EMI university program

The institutional context plays a crucial role in the configuration of teachers' perceptions within international university environments. Kalra (2024) illustrates this phenomenon in examining teachers' perceptions towards the integration of AI tools in language classrooms, highlighting specific influences, such as institutional support, professional development opportunities and cultural norms. These factors not only shape individual attitudes towards pedagogical innovations but also affect collective teaching culture within institutions.

Prasanna et al. (2024) contribute to this by highlighting various cultural contexts within educational environments, emphasizing that teachers' practices and perceptions are significantly formed by their ethnic background and institutional support systems. Collectively, these studies underline the intricate relationship between the institutional context and the perceptions of the teachers, which suggests that a deeper understanding of these dynamics is crucial to improve educational practices within international university environments.

Impact of Assessment Methods on Teachers' Emphasis on Grammar Versus Communication Skills

Lomgren's (2022) study, based on accounts from English teachers in Swedish lower secondary schools, found that teachers use a variety of both traditional and alternative assessment methods to evaluate students' grammar knowledge. These include formative assessments that monitor ongoing progress and summative assessments that measure what students have learned at certain stages. Teachers assess grammar through students' spoken and written language in authentic contexts. The selection of assessment methods depends on factors, such as student needs, teachers' own experience, school policies, and available time. This varied approach enables teachers to balance attention to both grammatical accuracy and communicative competence in their assessment practices.

Zohrabi and Nasirfam (2024) examined whether teachers' tests aligned with textbook updates or mainly assessed grammar and vocabulary, neglecting communicative skills. They highlighted Assessment for Learning (AfL) as a formative approach providing ongoing feedback to help teachers identify students' strengths and weaknesses, adapting instruction to build both grammar and communication. AfL integrates grammar into real-world tasks, promoting fluency, interaction, and learner engagement while fostering continuous progress. It encourages varied assessment methods like portfolios and self-assessments to enhance both accuracy and communicative ability. This approach shifts focus from traditional summative grammar tests (Assessment of Learning) to a broader development of communicative competence, learner autonomy, and motivation, influencing teachers to emphasize comprehensive language skills.

Additional research underscores the major influence of assessment on instructional decision-making. Rea-Dickins and Gardner (2000) suggest that classroom assessment functions not only as an assessment tool for student achievement but also as a mechanism guiding teachers toward powerful pedagogical approaches. For example, when examinations prioritize grammatical accuracy, teachers tend to adopt form-focused assessment, whereas more open-ended or communicative assessments encourage fluency-based instruction. Similarly, Butler (2009) reveals that large-scale assessment in Asian EFL contexts focus on how performance-based communicative assessments can trigger pedagogical reforms by valuing fluency and interaction as measurable learning outcomes.

These research findings strongly propose that the nature of assessment methods has a profound washback impact on classroom practices. Assessments that prioritize grammatical accuracy and vocabulary knowledge often reinforce grammar-heavy instruction and class activities, while performance-based, communicative, and formative assessments help teachers to integrate grammar-focused approaches into authentic communicative contexts, thereby balancing accuracy with fluency. Promoting teachers' assessment literacy and ensuring right alignment between classroom assessment and high-stakes national examination systems will be critical in supporting students' academic development in both grammar and communication skills.

Challenges and Barriers Teachers Face When Integrating Grammar and Communication in Classroom Practice

Underwood (2017) found that main challenges in combining grammar teaching with communicative activities in senior high school EFL classes in Japan stem from university entrance exams that focus on reading skills rather than oral communication. Teachers' attitudes and intentions are shaped by these social and contextual demands. To successfully integrate grammar with communicative teaching, significant institutional changes are needed, such as tailored professional development, enhanced collaboration among schools, teachers, and policymakers, and reducing teachers' additional duties to enable them to adopt new instructional methods. Furthermore, the national curriculum and textbooks often mix traditional grammar-translation methods with communicative goals, causing confusion and inconsistency. Insufficient teacher training and the prevalence of teacher-centered, exam-focused classroom methods contribute significantly to these challenges. Ultimately, there should be a balance of traditional grammar instruction and the development of communicative skills which require comprehensive changes across various levels of the education system.

In addition, Tichachart (2020) found that a significant challenge in CLT classrooms is the widespread misconception among teachers that CLT focuses only on speaking and listening, which leads to neglecting grammar instruction. Many teachers also struggle with incorporating grammar into communicative activities and often revert to traditional, teacher-led grammar teaching methods. Additionally, designing tasks that blend grammar with communication is difficult due to diverse learner needs. Activities like information-gap tasks, role-plays, and problem-solving can help but may require adaptation.

Thus, to fulfill their teaching duties, teachers frequently returned to traditional practices, focusing on explaining rules and forms and completing coursebook activities. What was particularly concerning was the limited use of authentic materials, which are considered essential elements of Communicative Language Teaching.

Effect of Teacher Training and Professional Development on Perceptions of Grammar-Communication Balance

Teacher training and professional development (PD) have a profound influence in shaping educators' conceptualizations of the interplay between grammar instruction and communicative competence. A substantial body of research demonstrates that pre-service programs grounded in communicative language teaching (CLT) principles encourage teachers to reconceptualize grammar as a functional resource embedded in meaning-making, rather than as a discrete system of prescriptive rules (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Littlewood, 1981). Richards (2015) illustrates how CLT-oriented training influences teacher identity and pedagogy by fostering instructional practices in which grammar is integrated into communicative tasks, thereby supporting learners' ability to construct and interpret meaning rather than focusing narrowly on forms.

Despite these initiatives, empirical evidence indicates that training alone is insufficient to transform deeply held teacher perceptions. Borg (2015), and Phipps and Borg (2009) highlight the enduring influence of teachers' prior learning experiences, which are often shaped by grammar-dominant traditions and continue to inform instructional decision-making, even when PD emphasizes communicative methodologies. Teachers may acknowledge the value of fluency but continue to prioritize accuracy, particularly when they feel accountable to examinations or parental expectations (Nguyen, 2011).

A number of studies highlight the importance of sustainable and collaborative PD models in supporting meaningful pedagogical change. Johnson (2016), and Richards and Burns (2012) argue that long-term engagement in reflective practice, peer collaboration, and classroom-based research create conditions for teachers to negotiate the right balance between form-focused and meaning-focused instruction more effectively. Tsui (2011) similarly stresses the importance of context-sensitive training that addresses the specific institutional constraints in which teachers operate. Practical interventions – such as workshops on task-based grammar integration or corrective feedback strategies in communicative tasks – have also been shown to enhance teachers' confidence in balancing accuracy and fluency (Borg, 2015; Nguyen, 2011).

Overall, teacher training and PD are critical in shaping teachers' perceptions on the balance between grammar and communication, in which the impact is moderated by prior experiences, contextual pressures, and support. While short-term workshops may raise awareness, they rarely affect sustainable change. Longer-term, collaborative approaches that incorporate reflection and contextual responsiveness appear more effective in enabling teachers to integrate grammar instruction within communicative frameworks. Further studies should develop professional development models that help teachers navigate the conflict between their established beliefs and new teaching approaches, especially in contexts focused on high-stakes examinations,

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods descriptive design to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of the balance between grammar instruction and communication skills in the curriculum. A quantitative survey with Likert-scale items was administered to 50 ESL teachers at an international university in Thailand, enabling statistical analysis of general attitudes and patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The survey instrument was developed based on prior studies on teacher beliefs and curriculum perceptions (Borg, 2003), ensuring content validity.

To complement the quantitative data, follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sampling of teachers to gain deeper insights into contextual factors influencing their perceptions, aligning with recommendations for triangulating data in educational research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The mixed-methods approach allowed for both breadth and depth of understanding, providing a comprehensive picture of how teachers negotiate curriculum demands related to grammar and communication (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics for survey responses and thematic analysis for interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This methodology is well-supported in the field of language education research for exploring complex teacher beliefs and curriculum enactment (Borg, 2003).

Results and Discussion

The following section presents both the quantitative and qualitative data collected in this study. Together, these complementary approaches provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions.

Table 1

Teachers' Perceptions of Grammar and Communication Balance in the EFL Curriculum (N = 50)
Perception items (5-point Likert: 1 Strongly disagree — 5 Strongly agree)

Perception Statement	Mean	SD	% Agree (4 & 5)	% Disagree (1 & 2)
1. Curriculum gives equal emphasis to grammar and communication	3.10	1.12	40%	36%
2. Grammar receives more class time than communicative practice	4.12	0.85	78%	10%
3. Students have enough opportunities for real communication	2.88	1.05	34%	44%
4. Assessment emphasizes accuracy over fluency	4.28	0.79	82%	8%
5. Textbooks support communicative activities well	3.05	1.10	38%	42%
6. Time constraints prevent use of communicative tasks	4.00	0.90	72%	14%
7. I feel adequately trained to teach both grammar and communication	3.20	1.15	42%	30%
8. Classroom size limits prioritizing communicative activities	3.85	1.00	68%	18%
9. Parents/school push focus on grammar	3.75	1.05	60%	22%
10. I would welcome more curriculum guidance on balance	4.40	0.75	84%	4%

Table 1 summarizes the responses of 50 ESL teachers regarding their perceptions of the balance between grammar instruction and communicative activities in the ESL curriculum. The data show that teachers generally perceive an imbalance favoring grammar over communication. Specifically, the statement "Grammar receives more class time than communicative practice" received a high mean score ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.85$), with 78% agreeing. Similarly, teachers agreed that assessments emphasize accuracy over fluency ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.79$), reflecting institutional pressures toward grammar-focused evaluation.

Conversely, fewer teachers felt that students have enough opportunities for real communication ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.05$), and only 38% agreed that textbooks adequately support communicative activities. Time constraints and large classroom sizes were also commonly reported barriers to implementing communicative tasks ($M = 4.00$ and 3.85 , respectively).

Importantly, 84% of teachers expressed a desire for more curriculum guidance on balancing grammar and communication ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.75$), indicating openness to professional development and curriculum reform.

Thai teachers' approaches to balancing grammar and communication are profoundly shaped by cultural norms and educational expectations that value accuracy and authority over interaction and fluency. While policy shifts and generational change offer evident opportunities for more communicative competence, structural constraints and cultural values remain significant challenges. A nuanced understanding of these contextual realities is essential for supporting Thai teachers in implementing pedagogical approaches that balance grammar and communication.

Curriculum design and educational policy evidently influence how teachers balance the relationship between grammar and communication. Globally, communicative-oriented framework such as the CEFR and task-based language teaching have shifted focus toward communicative fluency, interactional ability, and pragmatic competence, prioritizing grammar as a supportive

scaffold rather than the central instruction (Council of Europe Council for Cultural Cooperation Education Committee Modern Language Division, 2001; Ellis, 2017). In Thailand, national curriculum reform has attempted to align English language education with internationally recognized frameworks. The incorporation of CEFR benchmarks into the national curriculum standards by the Office of the Basic Education Commission (2016) reflects an official commitment to communicative competence across educational levels. Nonetheless, research features strong misalignment between policy rhetoric and classroom realities. Foley (2005) and Darasawang (2007) show that high-stakes standardized assessments prioritize grammar-oriented competency, diminishing communicative objectives. Implementation challenges are further complicated by contextual limitations. Over-crowded classrooms limited instructional time, and inadequate resources often push teachers toward traditional grammar-heavy approach (Hayes, 2010). In addition, insufficient professional development or training accompanying curricular reform usually results in superficial adoption of communicative approach, as teachers lack the authoritative support to implement them meaningfully (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017). Carless (2007) describes this as a “washback effect,” in which exam demands overrule communicative aspirations in the curriculum and dictate classroom practices.

This is also in line with other comparative studies across Southeast Asia which provide similar results. Nunan (2003) observes that throughout the region, policies that adopt communicative methods face obstacles regarding implementation due to rigid traditions of accuracy-oriented pedagogy. This proves that effective reform requires systemic and proper alignment among curriculum design, assessment frameworks, and teacher support.

Detailed Interview Transcript (Excerpt) Grouped by Themes

Theme 1: Curriculum and Assessment Pressure

Teacher 1:

“The curriculum we follow is very grammar heavy. Most of the exams test grammar knowledge rather than communication. So even though I want to focus on speaking and interaction, I feel pushed to spend more time drilling grammar rules. It’s like students need to pass the test first.”

Teacher 4:

“Parents want to see good grades and correct answers on paper. Communication skills are important, but the pressure from the school and parents is really on grammar accuracy. It makes me feel I have no choice but to prioritize grammar.”

The teachers emphasized that grammar-heavy curricula and exam-focused assessments pushed them to prioritize accuracy over communication. This aligns with the findings by Sarikha and Chumworathayee (2022), who noted Thai EFL teachers’ concerns that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) underemphasizes grammar in exam-driven contexts. Similarly, Zohrabi and Nasirfam (2024) and Lomgren (2022) highlight that assessment methods heavily influence pedagogy; when exams stress grammar, teachers adopt form-focused instruction. These parallels underscore how institutional assessment demands perpetuate grammar-centered teaching.

Theme 2: Training and Teacher Confidence

Teacher 3:

“I honestly don’t feel fully equipped to teach communicative tasks well. The training we receive focuses mostly on grammar explanations and

textbook exercises. So when it comes to activities that require real conversation, I'm not confident to lead or assess them."

Teacher 6:

"If there was more training focused on practical communicative teaching strategies, I would feel more prepared. Right now, I rely mostly on grammar teaching because that's what I was trained for."

A lack of professional preparation in communicative methodologies left many teachers feeling underconfident. This is consistent with Nazari et al. (2022), who showed that targeted training can reshape teacher beliefs about grammar instruction. Likewise, Borg (2015) argued that teachers' prior grammar-dominant experiences strongly influenced their practices unless professional development explicitly fosters reflective, communicative approaches. The teachers' reliance on grammar stemmed from training gaps that echo this wider challenge.

Theme 3: Classroom Constraints (Time, Size, Resources)

Teacher 2:

"My classes are large—sometimes over 40 students—which makes it very difficult to organize communicative group work or pair activities. It's just easier and faster to teach grammar in a lecture style."

Teacher 5:

"Time is always tight. We have a packed syllabus, and it feels impossible to fit in enough communicative practice. So I try to sneak in small speaking activities, but it's limited."

The teachers described how large classes and packed syllabi limit opportunities for communicative activities. Hayes (2010) similarly points to systemic barriers, such as class size, insufficient resources, and exam pressures that push Thai teachers back to traditional grammar-heavy methods. Underwood (2017) further notes that institutional constraints often create inconsistencies between curriculum goals and classroom realities, confirming that logistical challenges reinforce lecture-based grammar teaching.

Theme 4: Integrating Grammar in Communication

Teacher 7:

"When I manage to combine grammar teaching with communication, like using role plays or dialogues, I see much better engagement from students. They remember grammar points better when they use them in real contexts."

Teacher 8:

"I think grammar and communication shouldn't be seen as separate. Teaching grammar through meaningful communication makes language learning more natural and enjoyable for students."

The qualitative interviews highlighted four main themes influencing teachers' perceptions of grammar and communication balance in the ESL curriculum. Despite these constraints, teachers observed higher engagement when grammar was embedded in communicative contexts. This supports Tichachart (2020) and Numonova (2024), who argue that integrating grammar into communicative tasks strengthens retention and application. Likewise, Tarigan and Stevani (2022) found that grammar instruction can enhance speaking skills when connected to authentic tasks.

The interview findings thus align with research emphasizing grammar and communication as complementary rather than competing elements in ESL teaching.

The qualitative findings highlight systemic and contextual barriers that shape how teachers balance grammar and communication in the ESL curriculum. Consistent with prior studies (e.g. Sarikha & Chumworathayee, 2022; Zohrabi & Nasirfam, 2024; Lomgren, 2022), curriculum design and exam-driven assessment pressures compel teachers to prioritize grammatical accuracy over communicative fluency. A lack of targeted training and limited confidence in communicative methodologies further reinforce grammar-focused practices, echoing research by Nazari et al. (2022) and Borg (2015), who emphasize the enduring influence of teachers' prior grammar-dominant experiences. Structural constraints, such as large class sizes, heavy syllabi, and resource limitations mirror challenges, identified by Hayes (2010) and Underwood (2017), making lecture-style grammar instruction a practical necessity. Nevertheless, teachers also recognized the benefits of integrating grammar into communicative contexts, supporting findings by Tichachart (2020), Numonova (2024), and Tarigan and Stevani (2022), who argue for grammar and communication as complementary elements. Together, these findings underscore the need for curriculum reform, professional development, and systemic support to foster a more balanced and effective approach to ESL instruction.

Limitations and Suggestions

This study has several limitations. First, the use of convenience sampling at a single international university in Thailand restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader ESL contexts. Second, the reliance on self-reported survey data and interviews may introduce bias, as teachers stated perceptions do not always align with actual classroom practices (Widagsa et al., 2024). Third, time constraints limited the inclusion of classroom observations, which could have provided richer evidence of how grammar and communication are balanced in practice.

Finally, the relatively small sample size may not fully capture the diversity of teacher beliefs influenced by variables such as demographics, years of experience, educational background, or institutional context. Future research should incorporate larger, more diverse samples and triangulate findings with classroom observations to strengthen validity. Comparative research between novice and experienced teachers, or between public and private institutions, would shed light on how background and context shape instructional choices. Finally, studies that explore the impact of assessment reform and task-based approaches on teacher practices could provide actionable insights for policymakers seeking to better align grammar and communication in ESL curricula.

Conclusion

This study reveals that EFL teachers at an international university in Thailand perceive a clear imbalance between grammar instruction and communicative activities, with grammar receiving predominant emphasis due to curriculum design, assessment demands, parental expectations, and cultural norms. Quantitative findings indicate that teachers dedicate more class time to grammar and prioritize accuracy in assessments, while opportunities for authentic communication remain limited. Qualitative data further highlights constraints, such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, and insufficient training in communicative methodologies, all of which reinforce grammar-focused teaching. Given these constraints, targeted teacher training on effective integration of grammar instruction within Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches is essential to equip educators with practical strategies and confidence for balancing accuracy and fluency.

Despite these challenges, teachers recognize the pedagogical value of integrating grammar into meaningful communication and express strong desire for clearer curriculum guidance, professional development, and institutional support to achieve a more balanced approach. The findings underscore the importance of aligning curriculum objectives, assessment practices, and teacher training to foster both grammatical accuracy and communicative competence.

Ultimately, promoting a sustainable balance between grammar and communication requires systemic reform, including context-sensitive professional development, curriculum redesign, and assessment practices that value fluency as well as accuracy. By addressing these factors, educators can better prepare students for real-world language use while maintaining the rigor of grammatical instruction.

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Appendix

Survey: Teachers' Perceptions of the Balance Between Grammar and Communication Skills in the ESL Curriculum

Introduction:

This survey aims to gather teachers' perceptions of the balance between grammar instruction and communication skills in the current ESL curriculum. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used for research purposes only. Please answer honestly based on your teaching experience.

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. Age: _____
2. Gender: _____
3. Years of Teaching Experience: _____
4. Level(s) Taught (e.g., Primary, Secondary, University): _____
5. Highest Qualification: _____
6. Have you received in-service training on communicative language teaching? (Yes / No)

Section 2: Perception Statements

Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement using the following scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree | 2 = Disagree | 3 = Neutral | 4 = Agree | 5 = Strongly Agree

1. The current curriculum gives equal emphasis to grammar and communicative skills.
2. Grammar receives more class time than communicative practice.
3. Students have enough opportunities to use language for real communication.
4. Assessment in the curriculum emphasizes accuracy over fluency.
5. Textbooks support communicative activities well.
6. Time constraints prevent me from using communicative tasks.
7. I feel adequately trained to teach both grammar and communication.
8. Classroom size limits my ability to prioritize communicative activities.
9. Parents or school expectations push me to focus on grammar.
10. I would welcome more curriculum guidance on balancing grammar and communication.

Section 3: Open-Ended Questions

1. What is the single biggest barrier to balancing grammar and communication in your classroom?
2. Can you describe an example of a successful lesson that balanced both grammar and communication?
3. What changes in the curriculum would help you achieve a better balance between grammar and communication skills?
4. What training or resources would help you teach both grammar and communication more effectively?

Follow-up (Semi-structured interview / focus group prompts — 5–8 minutes each)

1. How do you decide when to teach grammar explicitly vs. through communication tasks?
2. Give an example of a successful lesson that balanced both. What made it work?
3. What assessment practices would support a better balance?
4. What training or resources would help you implement more communicative tasks?
5. Any school-level factors (timing, exam pressure, class size) that affect balance?