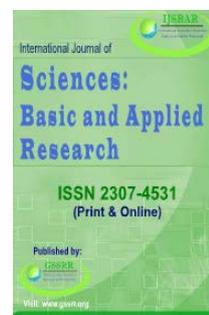




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## Survey for Determining the Current Status of Grammar Instruction in Foreign Language Teaching in the Republic of Macedonia

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### Abstract

The objective of this paper is to gain insights into the students' opinions, attitudes and suggestions in regard to grammar instruction in the learning and teaching of foreign languages. Furthermore, the paper explores and provides an overview of the current practices language teachers employ in order to present grammar rules in the foreign language classrooms in the Republic of Macedonia. The survey data was collected through a questionnaire administered primarily in the Faculty of Philology at the University Goce Delchev in Shtip. A total of 224 undergraduate students enrolled in their first semester participated in the survey from 2012 to 2016. The data analysis reveals students' prior experiences, attitudes, and concerns related to the role and importance of grammar in foreign language teaching as well as students' perceptions of the usefulness of grammar learning and its impact on the overall mastery of the language.

**Keywords:** attitudes; foreign language; grammar; grammar teaching.

### 1. Introduction

Throughout the history of foreign language teaching, one of the most hotly debated issues has been the status, role and influence of grammar on the overall mastery of the language.

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These questions have received so much attention and have been examined and interpreted in many different ways. In retrospect, the position of grammar has constantly been changing – ranging from grammatically dominant periods and methods to ‘anti-grammar’; from teaching a foreign language based primarily on grammar exercises to complete repudiation of it. However, the dilemmas that have persisted for decades are closely associated with the question: ‘Should grammar be taught in foreign language classroom and if yes, to what extent?’.

A great many applied linguists have focused their work on investigating the need for teaching grammar which eventually led many of them to form contradictory opinions. A number of researchers believe that teaching grammar does not have any significant effect on reaching fluency in the foreign language, on the other hand others conclude that grammar affects student’s mastery of the language to a great extent.

One of the most prominent advocate against grammar teaching is Krashen, who considers that grammar accuracy is not an imperative in the process of second language acquisition. Krashen suggests that oral grammar instruction in classroom should be avoided simply because they take time away from acquisition activities [1:144].

Rutherford & Smith highlight the need for a consciousness raising approach to the teaching of grammar in order to facilitate language learning [2:247].

In a similar way, Higgs points out the effect that grammar has on the ability to communicate a message in the foreign language and argues that both communication and grammar instruction should be equally present in language learning and teaching [3].

Additionally, as noted by Ellis Rod, it is of great importance for learners to become fully aware about certain formal features of the language, in other words, learners should form clear representations of what they are learning [4].

According to Celce-Murcia, learning the grammar is of great significance for learning the foreign language altogether, pointing out that grammar should be learned in context [5].

Furthermore, Lightbown & Spada explain that explicit teaching of grammar rules is far more effective than communicative activities [6], but on the other side of the continuum, based on his research findings, Doughty states that explicit grammar explanations do not have any beneficial role on the development of language and communicative competences whatsoever [7].

Among those who support and encourage explicit teaching of grammar as an integral part of the learning and teaching a foreign language are [8:128].

The outcomes of many researches [9,10,11,12] have confirmed the beneficial effects of explicit grammar teaching on a number of different aspects such as accuracy, pace of learning and level of language mastery.

The number of researchers [13,14,15,16] who agree that if the goal of learning a second language is developing learners' communicative competence and enabling students to use the language to convey messages, then both teaching grammar and communication should be integrated into the language learning and teaching-is great. Grammar teaching has proved to be a matter of serious debate and this paper aims to discuss the most common issues regarding grammar teaching but from a whole new perspective – that is students' perceptions and beliefs.

## **2. Data collection**

In an attempt to explore and to unveil students' attitudes about grammar instruction in the foreign language classroom and investigate how language teachers introduce and present grammar rules and structures in schools in Macedonia, the researcher was conducting the surveys from 2012 to 2016. In order to generate relevant, reliable data on students' experiences and beliefs from different territories across Macedonia, that is to be able to inspect the subject of our interest in as many elementary and high schools as possible, a decision was reached to administer the questionnaire among students enrolled in their first semester at the University of Goce Delchev in Shtip. On the day of the actual survey, students-respondents were firstly instructed to recall the time when they were actually learning a foreign language (English, German, Italian, French etc.) at elementary or high school as well as their appointed teacher and later, based on their recollection, answer the questions in the questionnaire. The survey was mainly conducted at the Faculty of Philology at the University of Goce Delchev, nonetheless a number of students enrolled in other Faculties, who were learning a foreign language as an elective course were also included. The questionnaire didn't ask the students to state the study program they were enrolled in at the time, since it was deemed irrelevant for our survey. Our principal goal was to focus on collecting data about students' general attitudes when it comes to learning grammar and correspondingly, and investigate how rules and structures are presented in schools across Macedonia.

Speaking about first semester undergraduate students, they all come from different towns and therefore different schools from across the country. Namely, students- respondents are former high school students who had attended different schools and study programs (social sciences, natural sciences and mathematics, literature and arts, vocational education etc.). The questionnaire asked the students to provide their answers on a number of different aspects of learning and teaching grammar such as: the necessity and importance of learning grammar in a foreign language, how often should grammar be reviewed and practiced, is teaching grammar predominant in the classroom, how did the teacher introduce and present grammar rules, what methods were being used by their teachers etc. The first survey was conducted in the winter semester of 2012/2013. However, in order to gather as many questionnaires as possible for data analysis we decided to continue distributing questionnaires in the following years 2013/2014, 2014/2015 and 2015/2016, which eventually resulted in gathering a total of 224 completed questionnaires i.e. 224 students enrolled in their first semester of studies participated in the survey.

Guided by the general hypothesis: 'Explicit grammar instruction is the predominant method in the teaching of foreign languages in elementary and high schools across the Republic of Macedonia.' - the data collected from the questionnaires was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. In addition, for the purpose of fully examining and testing the general hypothesis we formulated:

Hypothesis 1: Students learn foreign language grammar through explicit instruction;

Hypothesis 2: Students are not aware of the meaning of the term implicit grammar instruction in foreign language learning;

Hypothesis 3: Teachers allot too much time on the practice and production of grammar rules during lessons;

Hypothesis 4: Students most often feel bored when grammar is being taught.

### **3. Analysis of the questionnaire data**

In this section the researcher will present statistic description of the questionnaire in order to examine and test the abovementioned hypotheses. Governed by the underlying inclination and purpose to discover how grammar is being taught in the foreign language classrooms in Macedonia and obviously in accordance with the principal goal of this survey, which is to determine the most widespread and predominant students' attitudes towards grammar teaching, the questionnaire was designed by the author of this paper.

The questionnaire contains a total of 30 questions, to be more specific 27 close-end questions where students could choose one answer from two, three or four possible answers, and three open-ended questions which allowed students to give free-form answers. The students were also given the opportunity to justify their responses to 3 of the 27 close-ended questions by providing some additional information based on their experiences.

Students were not given a time limit when filling out the questionnaires but on average each student needed approximately 15 minutes to complete it.

Given that students' personal information (name, surname, age, place of residence) are not pertinent to the survey in any way, the questionnaire does not contain such questions.

In regard to the content of the questions/statements, the questionnaire was divided into 4 sections. The first section includes questions/statements (1 to 7) that help us determine students' prevailing attitudes relating to the importance of learning and knowing grammar rules.

The results obtained from the analysis clearly indicate that students are well aware of the fundamental need of learning grammar rules in the learning and mastering of a foreign language altogether. Similarly, to question number one 'Do you think it is necessary to learn grammar rules while learning a foreign language?' only two students answered that learning grammar is not a necessity, whereas 158 students consider grammar to have a great significance in the successful mastery of a foreign language which undeniably imposes the need to learn grammar rules. Moreover, 64 of the respondents share the opinion that not all grammar rules should be learned, they suggest that there should be a rational selection of which ones have to be learned. The findings reveal that 178 respondents disagree with the statement 'when learning a foreign language, the most important is to learn how to speak the language, words and sentences do not have to be grammatically correct', in other words

sentences have to be grammatically correct, in contrast 46 respondents think that when speaking the foreign language sentences do not have to be grammatically correct.

Summarizing the results of the third question, 75 respondents believe that knowing the grammar rules is of great importance particularly in writing tasks, 82 of the total number consider that grammar errors are most apparent in speaking whilst a minority of the students, 24 to be exact, assert that solid knowledge of grammar is vitally and equally important for both writing and speaking. Surprisingly, only 12 respondents marked all the given answers as correct, possibly because they wanted to stress the significant role of grammar not only in skills such as writing and speaking but also reading and listening comprehension. The aim of the fourth question is to reveal 'When do students concentrate on grammar the most?', and the answers clearly show that the majority of the respondents (143) focus mostly on grammar rules in writing tasks, 74 students pay close attention to the grammar when speaking. And only seven responded that they focus on grammar when other students are speaking.

Question number five, 'Do you try to focus on grammar rules and apply them while speaking?' yielded 139 negative and 85 affirmative answers, in other words 62,1% from the total number of participants do not pay much attention to grammar rules and their usage when they communicate in the foreign language.

The analysis of the sixth statement revealed that 82,5% of the respondents opt for using short, simple sentences in conversation because they face difficulties to form a grammatically correct complex sentence in the foreign language.

The seventh question, 'Will the students be able to communicate successfully in the foreign language if he/she knows the grammar rules?' elicited 174 affirmative answers which actually points out that according to students, knowledge of grammar rules is closely related with students' communicative competence. Only 50 students believe that knowing the rules does not necessarily mean they can be successfully applied in communication.

The second part of the questionnaire, questions/statements 8 to 14, investigate students' experiences and perceptions related to grammar instruction in foreign language teaching, to put it another way- how much time and attention does grammar receive in the foreign language classroom?

In response to the eighth question, 'Do you think grammar rules receive enough attention during foreign language lessons?' -a great percentage of the respondents, 72,8% unveiled that grammar is often being reviewed and practiced during lessons, whereas only 27,2% stated that more attention is being paid on activities that foster communication.

The following question, number nine, deals with how much lesson time should be allocated to grammar practice and student's opinions of this issue. Namely, analysis showed that 69,2% believe that grammar should be practiced once a week, additional 24,1% of the respondents explain that grammar should be practiced 15 minutes each lesson, whilst a very low percentage of 6,7 % consider that practicing grammar during lessons should be avoided altogether.

Question number 10 in the questionnaire is a scale question where the respondents were required to choose one answer on a given scale (ranging from often to rarely) and determine how often their teachers taught grammar in two or three consecutive lessons. Responses vary greatly, 85 students answered 'often', 56 marked 'sometimes', 52 consider such lessons occurred 'rarely' and finally according to 31 students the teacher 'never' taught grammar two or more subsequent lessons.

The following two questions 11 and 12 had a slightly different objective with the ultimate goal of collecting some sort of "suggestions", in other words "pieces of advice" for more effective grammar teaching in foreign language learning according to the students. The findings show that 67% of the respondents explain that language teachers should pay equal attention to both grammar and communicative activities during lessons because, as students further elaborated, not learning the grammar rules will consequently result in not being able to express themselves in the foreign language accurately. Obviously, these findings accentuate the need to reach and maintain a balance between grammar and communicative activities in the foreign language classroom. The remaining 33% of the students voted in favor of more communicative activities being incorporated in lessons explaining that even though some students have a good grasp of the grammar rules, they may still find it difficult to apply them in conversation. What's more, answers to the question 'What changes should be made in grammar instruction in the teaching and learning of foreign languages?' – clearly confirm hypothesis 4. Based on their prior language learning experience, 152 respondents suggest that teachers should introduce and teach grammar in a more interesting, motivating way, which gives us a general picture of the current practice of teaching grammar and student's attitudes. Namely, the way teachers present and teach grammar is considered to be uninteresting, that is to say, students most often feel bored. Additionally, 32 respondents raise their voice in favor of incorporating more grammar practice during lessons and another 32 students support the idea that the number of foreign language lessons should be increased in order to have more opportunities and time to practice grammar rules and structures. Only 8 of the total number of students support the last two options, i.e. b) and c).

As far as this question 'When is the best time to start learning grammar rules?' is concerned, the majority of the students agreed that grammar rules and new vocabulary should be taught simultaneously. When formulating this question, we used the term elementary level because we considered that the term breakthrough/ beginner level (A1) as given in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages would be too vague or even unknown for the students. The remaining of the respondents, 25% believe that first and foremost, they should aim their attention at learning vocabulary and later on shift their focus to learning grammar rules.

In a similar way, the following question 'Should grammar be still practiced once students reach the advanced level?' – contains the term level so that we avoid any misunderstandings among respondents. The analysis of the answers indicates that 79,9% of the students assume that in foreign language learning, grammar rules should be reviewed and practiced continually regardless of students' language level, on the contrary 20,1% of them think that there is no need to practice grammar once they reach the advanced level.

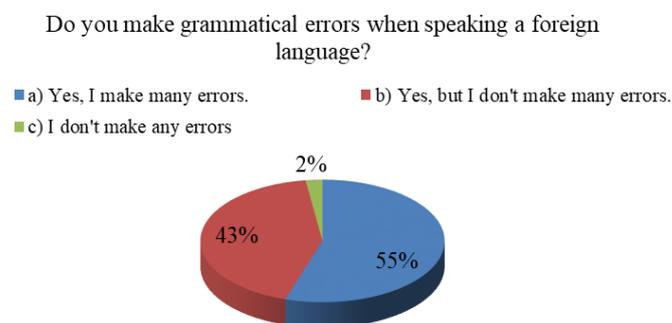
The third section of the questionnaire contains questions 15 to 18 and investigates yet another hotly-debated topic in grammar learning and teaching and that is grammatical errors. The objective is to examine students' opinions related to how grammatical errors are being corrected and how aware they are when making errors.

'If a student makes grammatical errors in the beginning stages of learning a foreign language and the teacher does not correct them, would it be difficult to get rid of those errors in the latter stages?' – is question 15 and the results obtained from the analysis reveal that 186 students gave an affirmative answer whereas only 38 think the opposite, they consider that it wouldn't be difficult to eradicate grammatical errors at the latter stages.

Question 16, 'Should the teacher interrupt the student and correct the grammatical error while the student is speaking?' brought to light students' preference regarding correction techniques, most of them agree that the teacher should correct the error as soon as it occurs which subsequently assists students in learning the rule and avoid making the same error again. A small number of students, about 10, do not support this view and believe that the teacher should not interrupt the students while speaking in any way, since it will break the flow of communication and the student might get distracted from the speaking task. 134 respondents are of the opinion that the language teacher should correct grammatical errors however, not too often as it might reflect negatively on student's focus and attention while speaking.

The outcome of the analysis of question 17 'Should teachers correct grammatical errors at all?', showed that the majority of the respondents (63,4%) believe that grammatical errors should be corrected solely in written work, another 29,9% of them consider error correction should be done in both written work and speaking tasks since this can help students to become fully aware of their grammatical errors thus, avoid making them ever again. A very low percentage (6,7%) of the respondents hold the opinion that errors should not be corrected in any way.

The following pie chart demonstrates the distribution of answers to question 18.



**Figure 1:** question 18

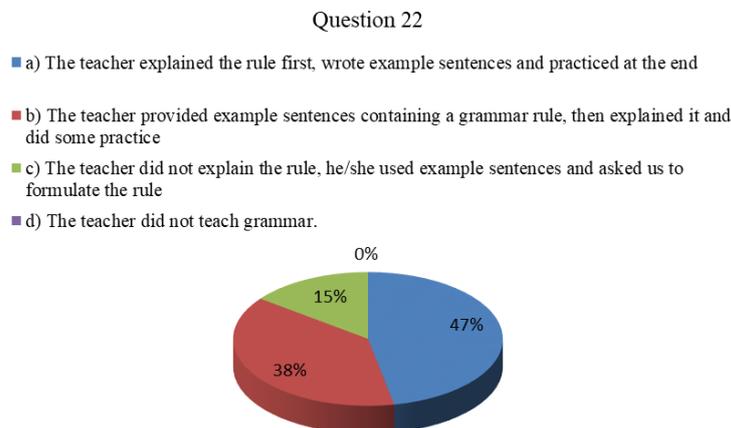
As it can be observed from the chart, it is evident that the majority of the students are cognizant of their grammatical errors which implies that they know the grammar rules explicitly and are capable of noticing the errors when they make them.

The fourth part of the questionnaire includes questions 19 to 30 whose purpose is to collect data and capture a broad picture of the predominant methods teachers employ when teaching grammar rules, how students learn those grammar rules and structures, what helps them the most in mastering the rules, and eventually we aim to determine whether students are familiar with the terms explicit and implicit grammar teaching.

The questions that follow, 20 and 21 are close-ended questions with only two given options: ‘Yes’ and ‘No’, what is more, if a student answered affirmatively he was required to further explain and support his answer. In this section, we asked the students if they are familiar with the terms explicit and implicit grammar teaching and generated only two affirmative answers. To be more specific, only two students reported that they are familiar with the term explicit grammar teaching, and provide the following explanations: ‘it means the teacher speaks about grammar’ and ‘it means that the teacher gives definitions about the grammar rules’. None of the students displayed any knowledge or familiarity whatsoever with the term implicit grammar teaching. The abovementioned figures are a clear indication that our alternate hypothesis 2 is correct: Students are not aware of the meaning of the term implicit grammar instruction in foreign language learning.

Question 21, ‘How did you feel when grammar was being taught in elementary and high school?’, unveiled the following figures: 57,1% of the respondents paid close attention when grammar was being taught in lessons because they knew how important grammar is. Only a slight percentage of the students (2,7%) felt utterly bored, whereas 40,2% reported that they couldn’t focus on grammar instruction simply because the lesson was not interesting. Based on these figures we can conclude that there is a discrepancy between the results obtained from the analysis of question 21 and hypothesis 4: Students most often feel bored when grammar is being taught. As mentioned before, the survey was mainly conducted at the Faculty of Philology, so we presume that the former high school students were closely following and focusing on grammar instructions because they were intending to study languages at university.

To showcase the distribution of answers to question 22 ‘How did your teacher taught grammar in elementary and high school?’, we created the following pie chart.



**Figure 2:** question 22

The data represented in the chart above, demonstrates the actual reality of grammar teaching in the foreign language classroom. Students’ answers reveal that in schools in Macedonia, grammar is being taught predominantly in a direct, deductive and explicit way. According to the analysis the inductive, explicit approach of teaching grammar is present with satisfactory 15 per cent, none of the respondents answered that teachers

never taught grammar. A logical interpretation of the aforementioned results is that students are fully aware and notice how and when grammar is being taught in lessons. Consequently, we can easily infer that the implicit approach of teaching grammar was not being implemented in the foreign learning teaching practices at all. Moreover, the results from the previous two questions confirmed that hypothesis 1 is correct: Students learn foreign language grammar through explicit instruction.

When it comes to using lesson materials, the vast majority of students reports that teachers relied solely on using blackboard, chalk and textbooks, they never implemented any additional materials or resources to support grammar teaching. A very low number of students, nine, to be exact, answer this questions affirmatively and share their experiences, these are their answers: ‘the teacher used to give us separate pieces of paper where we could see the definition of the grammar rule and a few examples underlined with markers’; ‘we used to do some online practice occasionally’; ‘a CD player was used’; ‘we used to listen to audio lessons’; ‘the teacher used presentations’; ‘he/she used to hand out declension tables’.

Furthermore, based on their language learning experience 63,8% of the respondents agree that the most effective way of learning grammar rules and structures is when the teacher explain the rule first and then the students do some exercises in the textbooks. What is more, about one third of the students (33,5%) deem this way of teaching to be most effective because in their opinion, when students are left alone to figure out a grammar rule and its usage – it is simply a waste of time. However, there is this 2,7% of students who think that is would be more beneficial for the students if the grammar rules are introduced and presented through meaningful examples.

Keeping in mind the outcomes of the previous questions, we could easily anticipate the answers of the next two. We inferred that as a result of the teaching methods that were applied in teaching grammar, students are accustomed to learn grammar rules in an explicit way, so the figures given in the charts below, did not come as a surprise.

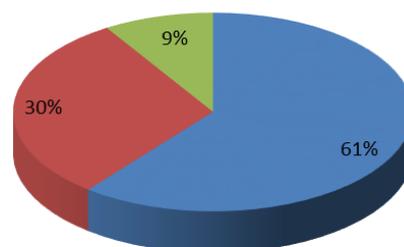
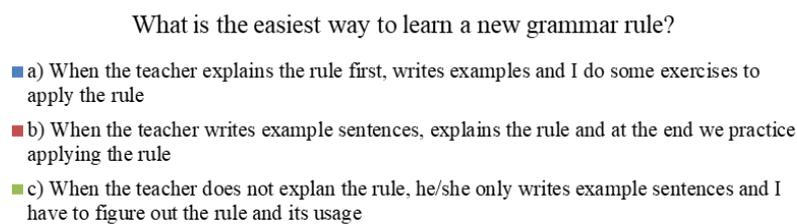
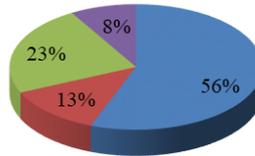


Figure 3: question 25

How do you learn grammar rules?

- a) I do a lot of exercises to practice the rule.
- b) I read a number of texts/sentences where the rule had been applied, but I don't do any exercises.
- c) I memorize the rule, but I don't do any exercises.
- d) I don't learn grammar rules at all.

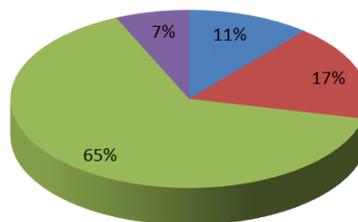


**Figure 4:** question 26

The purpose behind the next question was to determine the number of grammar rules that students could recall at the time of filling out the questionnaire. The data displayed in the following chart specifies the percentage distribution of answers to question 27.

How many grammar rules can you recall at this very moment?

- a) Only one rule
- b) Two or three rules
- c) More than five rules
- d) I can't recall any grammar rules at this moment



**Figure 5:** question 27

Afterwards, the students were asked to list the actual grammar rules they recall at that given moment.

The analysis of their responses show that 25 students could recall only one grammar rule at that moment and all of them with no exceptions wrote down the rule. 39 students reported they can recall two or three rules, out of which 37 listed three rules while only two students listed two rules each. A great number of students (145) answered that they remember more than five rules- the statistics looks like this: 132 students wrote four rules, 12 students wrote 5 and only one student managed to list six rules.

After careful observation and analysis of the results regarding to the grammar rules students could recall and write down in the questionnaire, we made a list of the ones most commonly mentioned: in English language the

suffix '-s' is added to verbs in third person singular to form the present simple tense; present continuous is used for actions happening at the moment of speaking; plural is formed by adding the suffix '-s' to the nouns; to form the possessive we add '-s'; past simple tense is formed by adding the suffix '-ed' to the infinitive of the verbs; to form the comparative of one-syllable adjectives the suffix '-er' is added and so on.

In respect to German language, the following grammar rules turned out to be most easily recalled by the respondents: the preposition *mit* always requires the dative case; nouns are written with a capital letter; the vast majority of verbs in infinitive end with the suffix '-en'.

Among students' answers we could also encounter some rules that refer to grammar rules in Italian language such as: *il* is the definite article for masculine singular nouns; nouns which end in *-a* in singular, in plural end in *-e*; when *-are*, *-ere* and *-ire* are removed from the verb we get the verb base form and to form a certain grammar tense suffixes are added to the base form of the verb *et cetera*.

'What helped you the most when learning grammar?' – was the penultimate question in the questionnaire and was answered by a total of 196 students. Their responses vary, namely, 125 students provided a short explanation that it is practicing the rules or drill and practice exercises. According to 22 students, teacher's explanations had a crucial role in getting the students to master the grammar rules. Additional 37 respondents consider continuous and regular repetition to be the most effective in learning the grammar rules of a foreign language, whereas only 12 students acknowledged they make comparison and correlate the grammar rule of two different foreign languages.

Analyzing the results of the final question 'What is the most effective/the easiest way to master the grammar rules in a foreign language?', we discovered that only about half of the students, 57,1% to be more precise, had taken the time to answer it. As a result, we assumed that the remaining of the students who did not respond to this question do not have any suggestions whatsoever about what assists or facilitates the learning and mastering of grammar in foreign language classroom. Now, after careful and thorough analysis and categorizing students' explanations (a total of 128) the outcomes are as follows: 45 students agree that the best way to learn the grammar rules of a foreign language is when the teacher first explains the rule and then students do some drilling exercises where they can apply that rule; 35 explain that doing as many drilling exercises as possible will result in successful grammar learning; three students mention the beneficial effect of doing online exercises; and only one student suggest that the easiest way to learn grammar is through conversation provided that the interlocutor has excellent grammar knowledge and is able to correct student's errors. What is more, 25 of the students highly recommend regular study and repetition of the grammar rules, the idea of going abroad and communicating with the native speakers of the foreign language to master the grammar is supported by 11 students, only two students advise that the best way is to pay close attention to grammar instructions during lesson and encourage not to hesitate to ask questions whenever there is a need for further explanation and clarification. Surprisingly, we came across two 'I don't know' answers, and one student explains that he/she studies the rule first, next he/she reads texts and while reading focuses on finding the rules, underlines them and at the end reads the texts a few more times.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Taking into account the students' prior experiences and beliefs related to grammar learning and teaching, it can freely be concluded that the data that was generated and thoroughly analyzed is in conformity with the general hypothesis. Namely, explicit grammar instruction is the predominant method in the teaching of foreign languages in elementary and high schools across the Republic of Macedonia.

The findings outlined in the previous section of this paper, particularly in questions 22 to 30, are also in accordance with and confirm alternate hypothesis 1: Students learn foreign language grammar through explicit instruction. Moreover, the fact that none of the students reported they are actually familiar with the term implicit grammar instruction, prompts us to conclude that hypothesis 2 is also confirmed: Students are not aware of the meaning of the term implicit grammar instruction in foreign language learning.

The statistic description of the questionnaire helped up capture a broad picture of the current situation of grammar teaching and its importance, hence confirmed hypothesis 3: Teachers allot significant amount of lesson time on the practice and production of grammar rules. This is supported by the fact that 72,7% of the respondents stated that teachers taught grammar very often (question 8) and another 38%, drawing on their prior experience, claimed that it often occurred the teacher to teach grammar in two or more consecutive lessons (question 10).

Lastly, according to the results, hypothesis 4: Students most often feel bored when grammar is being taught, is not fully confirmed. This is evident in the responses the students provided, namely 57,1% of them said they attentively listened to their teachers while presenting grammar rules and structures, in contrast only 2,7% answered that grammar lessons were monotonous, and the remaining 40,2% of the students couldn't focus on the lessons because lectures were not interesting and motivating enough. These numbers might be a direct consequence of the fact that the survey was conducted mainly at the Faculty of Philology, and made us assume that the respondents had intentions of studying foreign languages long before they enrolled into undergraduate school, which is why they chose to attentively listen to teacher's grammar lectures and did not necessarily feel bored.

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