Research Paper

Emotional Engagement and Student Perceptions of Grammar Teaching Across Subjects

Ogbevoen Faith Ehis[1]

[1] Independent Researcher of FLE, University of Sunderland, England.

Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between emotional engagement and student perceptions of grammar teaching across English and Modern Foreign Language (MFL) classrooms in United Kingdom secondary schools. Despite the renewed emphasis on grammar in national curricula, evidence suggests that students continue to experience grammar as confusing, boring, or irrelevant, leading to a decline in performance from Year 7 through Year 11. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, this study draws on grammar assessments, perception surveys, and teacher interviews to analyze both cognitive and affective dimensions of grammar learning. Results indicate that grammar performance steadily decreases across year groups and that students often fail to associate grammar with both English and MFL, undermining cross-linguistic transfer. The findings also reveal that negative emotional responses, particularly boredom and confusion, are more pronounced in MFL contexts, where grammar instruction is frequently delivered without adequate scaffolding or connection to prior knowledge. The discussion highlights the need for a shared grammatical metalanguage, integration of grammar into communicative activities, and professional development to help teachers create low-anxiety learning environments. Recommendations are made for systemic reforms that can position grammar as a unifying and empowering component of language education, enhancing both engagement and achievement.

Keywords: Grammar Pedagogy, Emotional Engagement, Modern Foreign Languages, Cross-Curricular Framework, Student Perceptions

Introduction

The teaching of grammar in United Kingdom secondary schools has long been characterized by fluctuation and tension between pedagogical models that prioritize either structural accuracy or communicative competence. The introduction of communicative language teaching into Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) led to a gradual reduction in explicit grammar instruction, even as educators and researchers expressed concern about the resulting decline in students' syntactic knowledge and the subsequent impact on language acquisition outcomes (Hurman, 1992; Metcalfe, Laurillard, & Mason, 1995). In English classrooms, grammar has experienced similar oscillations. Although the National Curriculum of the 1990s attempted to reassert the importance of grammar by describing it as the skeleton of language, this emphasis was later weakened as functional and topic-based models of teaching gained dominance (DES/WO, 1990; DfEE/QCA, 1999). The result has been an inconsistent treatment of grammar across departments, leaving students with fragmented knowledge and limited ability to transfer grammatical understanding between subjects (Williamson & Hardman, 1995).

This fragmentation has far-reaching implications for both cognitive and emotional development. Scholars such as Bloor (1986) and QCA (1998) have noted that grammar is often presented as a technical or remedial add-on rather than as a central component of language learning, leading to its marginalization in curricula. As a consequence, students struggle to associate grammar meaningfully with either English or MFL. The compartmentalization of grammar has contributed to widespread misconceptions regarding its relevance and purpose, undermining students' metalinguistic awareness and weakening their confidence when navigating both native and foreign language structures (Pachler, Norman, & Field, 1999). When grammar is treated in isolation or inconsistently across departments, learners may fail to recognize its unifying role in supporting communication and meaning-making, which in turn diminishes their motivation to engage deeply with grammatical study (Turner, 1996; Grenfell, 1996).

Emotional engagement is a crucial yet often overlooked aspect of grammar instruction. Field (2000) argues that negative affective filters, such as boredom or anxiety, can prevent learners from fully engaging with language tasks, particularly those perceived as overly abstract or irrelevant. The uploaded study's findings reveal that students frequently describe grammar lessons as boring, confusing, or irrelevant, particularly in MFL contexts where grammatical concepts are often introduced without adequate scaffolding or connection to prior knowledge (Macdonald, 1993; Wright, 1999). These emotional responses are not trivial; they shape how learners approach grammar tasks and influence their willingness to practice and internalize grammatical forms. Hawkins (1984) emphasizes that language awareness must encompass not only technical knowledge but also a positive attitude toward language learning. When learners fail to see

grammar as useful or engaging, they are less likely to transfer their knowledge across subjects, which compounds existing curricular gaps.

The present study aims to explore the relationship between emotional engagement and grammar learning by focusing on how students perceive grammar in English and MFL lessons. By drawing on student performance data, perception surveys, and teacher interviews, this work seeks to uncover how fragmented teaching approaches and inconsistent terminology contribute to emotional disengagement. The ultimate goal is to position grammar as a unifying cognitive and communicative resource, demonstrating that positive emotional engagement can enhance grammatical competence and encourage transfer of knowledge between English and MFL. In doing so, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to reimagine grammar instruction as both intellectually rigorous and emotionally meaningful for learners in UK secondary schools.

Research Objectives

- To analyze student perceptions of grammar in English and MFL.
- To investigate how emotional engagement affects grammar performance.
- To assess whether inconsistent teaching practices contribute to negative perceptions.

Literature Review

The teaching of grammar has been the subject of considerable debate in both English and Modern Foreign Language (MFL) education, with scholars questioning not only what grammar should be taught but also how and why it should be delivered to learners. Carter (1990) notes that grammar has often been reduced to a prescriptive list of rules rather than a means of understanding how language works in authentic communication. In English education, early curricular reforms oscillated between emphasizing formal grammar instruction and abandoning it in favor of creative expression and literature study, leaving teachers unsure about how to balance grammatical accuracy with broader literacy objectives (Hudson, 2001). In MFL teaching, the adoption of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the late twentieth century marked a significant shift toward prioritizing fluency and meaning over form (Littlewood, 1981). While CLT offered many pedagogical benefits, such as increased student participation and a focus on authentic language use, several researchers observed that it led to a neglect of systematic grammar teaching and left learners with gaps in structural competence (Widdowson, 1990; Mitchell, 1994).

These tensions gave rise to calls for a more integrated approach that would restore grammar to a meaningful place within language instruction without reverting to decontextualized drills. Andrews (1999) argues that grammar should be conceptualized as a resource for making meaning rather than as a restrictive set of rules.

This approach would enable learners to use grammar as a tool for effective communication, aligning with Halliday's (1985) functional model of language. In MFL contexts, Doughty and Williams (1998) advocate for focus-on-form approaches, where grammatical features are taught within meaningful communicative activities. Such approaches have been shown to improve learners' ability to notice and internalize grammatical patterns while maintaining engagement with communicative tasks. Beyond cognitive outcomes, there is a growing recognition that emotional and affective factors play a crucial role in how students experience grammar learning. Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis suggests that variables such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence directly affect language acquisition by either facilitating or inhibiting input processing. Studies by Arnold and Brown (1999) highlight that when learners experience high levels of language anxiety, particularly around error correction and assessment, their capacity to absorb grammatical knowledge diminishes. Similarly, Williams and Burden (1997) emphasize that motivation is a dynamic process influenced by classroom climate, teaching style, and learners' sense of agency. When grammar is presented as disconnected from students' communicative needs, it risks being perceived as tedious and unnecessary, leading to disengagement.

The uploaded study underscores these concerns by documenting how students frequently describe grammar lessons as boring or confusing, particularly in higher year groups where their performance on grammar assessments declines. This finding aligns with research by Borg (1999), who found that many teachers feel underprepared to teach grammar in ways that are engaging and contextually meaningful. When teachers lack confidence, they may default to either excessive formalism or a near-total avoidance of grammar, both of which can alienate students. Furthermore, Brumfit (1995) argues that a failure to coordinate grammar teaching across English and MFL departments leads to inconsistent terminology and pedagogical approaches, which can exacerbate learner confusion and hinder the transfer of grammatical knowledge. Despite these insights, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the emotional dimensions of grammar learning across subjects. Much of the existing research examines grammar either within English or MFL classrooms but rarely considers how students perceive grammar as a cross-curricular construct. As Pachler (2000) observes, there is a missed opportunity to develop learners' metalinguistic awareness by drawing explicit connections between the grammar of their first language and that of the foreign languages they study. Addressing this gap requires research that not only measures cognitive outcomes but also explores students' affective responses to grammar teaching in both domains. By situating grammar within a broader cross-curricular and emotional framework, future studies can contribute to pedagogical models that are both linguistically rigorous and psychologically supportive, helping learners to see grammar as a valuable and empowering aspect of their education.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design to provide a comprehensive account of how students perceive grammar instruction and how these perceptions relate to their emotional engagement and performance outcomes. Mixed-methods approaches are particularly suited to educational research because they combine the strengths of quantitative measurement with the depth of qualitative insights, allowing for triangulation of findings and richer interpretation (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). Quantitative data were collected to track performance trends in grammar across year groups and to identify broad patterns of perception, while qualitative data captured the nuances of student and teacher attitudes toward grammar teaching (Dörnyei, 2007). The participants were drawn from secondary schools covering Years 7 to 11, encompassing Key Stages 3 and 4. This range was selected to capture developmental shifts in grammar competence and attitudes over time, an approach supported by Williamson and Hardman (1995), who argue that metalinguistic awareness and emotional engagement with grammar evolve significantly during adolescence. The sample included a mix of students taking English and at least one Modern Foreign Language, ensuring representation from both curricular areas where grammar plays a central role (Grenfell, 1996).

Data collection involved several instruments. Grammar assessments were used to generate quantitative data on student performance, following the recommendation of QCA (1998) that grammar outcomes be monitored systematically to inform pedagogy. Student perception surveys contained a combination of Likert-scale items to measure interest, confidence, and perceived relevance, as well as open-ended prompts that encouraged participants to describe their emotional responses to grammar lessons (Macdonald, 1993). In addition, semi-structured interviews with teachers were conducted to explore their views on grammar teaching practices, challenges, and strategies for fostering student engagement (Borg, 1999). The analysis process combined descriptive and inferential statistical techniques with thematic analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed for trends in mean scores across year groups and for correlations between perception ratings and performance, reflecting methods suggested by Mitchell (1994). Qualitative data were coded inductively to identify recurring themes such as boredom, confusion, and perceived relevance, following the thematic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This dual analysis allowed for a more robust understanding of the relationship between emotional engagement and grammar learning across English and MFL contexts.

Results

Grammar Scores by Year Group

The analysis of grammar assessment scores revealed a clear downward trend in performance from Year 7 through Year 11, highlighting a gradual erosion of grammatical competence as students progress through secondary school. This pattern corroborates findings by Thomas (1997), who observed that students tend to lose explicit grammatical awareness over time when instruction becomes less systematic. The highest average scores were recorded among Year 7 students, suggesting that early secondary instruction still benefits from residual knowledge from primary school literacy programs, which often place a stronger emphasis on formal grammar (Hudson, 2001). By Year 9, however, a marked decline was observed, aligning with Mitchell's (1994) observation that grammar teaching often diminishes during middle secondary years as teachers shift focus to literature study in English and communicative tasks in MFL. This downward trajectory continued into Years 10 and 11, where grammar was often treated as exam preparation rather than as an ongoing developmental process (Carter, 1990). The data suggest that inconsistent reinforcement of grammatical concepts across subjects contributes to the steady decline in scores, reflecting Pachler's (2000) argument that lack of curricular continuity impedes the consolidation of grammatical knowledge.
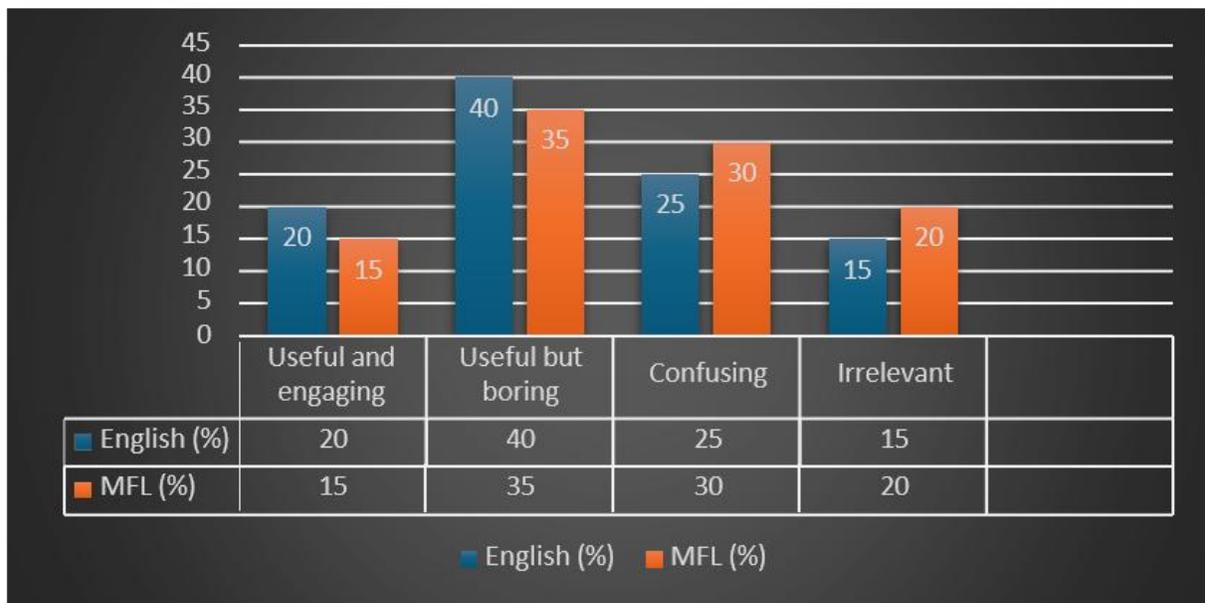

	Useful and engaging	Useful but boring	Confusing	Irrelevant	
English (%)	20	40	25	15	
MFL (%)	15	35	30	20	

Figure 1. Average Grammar Scores by Year Group

Student Associations of Grammar

Survey data examining student associations of grammar with specific subjects indicated that only about one-third of respondents linked grammar equally to both English and MFL. This finding supports Brumfit's (1995) critique that grammar teaching remains compartmentalized, with insufficient effort made to highlight its cross-curricular relevance. A notable proportion of students associated grammar exclusively with English, reflecting the historical dominance of grammar in literacy education and the perception that it is an inherently native language concept (Carter, 1990). Conversely, a smaller group associated grammar only with MFL, possibly because of the overt way in which verb conjugations and sentence structures are taught in foreign language classrooms (Grenfell, 1996). Worryingly, nearly one-fifth of students indicated that they did not associate grammar with either subject, a finding consistent with Turner's (1996) observation that many learners see grammar as an abstract and detached topic. These results point to a gap in metalinguistic awareness, as students fail to recognize that grammar operates as a unifying linguistic system that underpins all language use (Halliday, 1985). The lack of cross-subject association may also explain difficulties students face in transferring grammatical knowledge from English to MFL, a transfer that research by Hawkins (1984) and Pachler (2000) suggests is crucial for developing competence in additional languages.
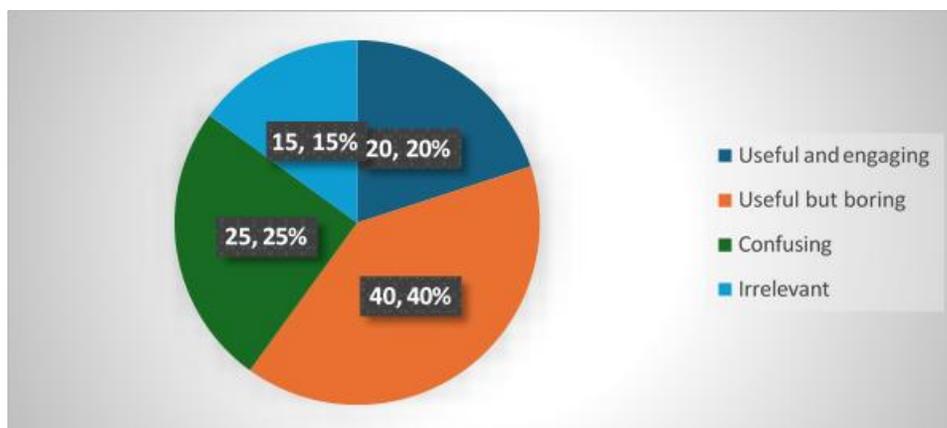

Figure 2. Student Associations of Grammar with Subjects

Student Perceptions of Grammar Lessons

When asked about their emotional and cognitive perceptions of grammar lessons, students revealed predominantly negative attitudes, particularly toward MFL grammar sessions. While a minority of respondents described grammar lessons as useful and engaging, the majority labeled them as either boring or confusing. This finding aligns with Arnold and Brown (1999), who argue that disengagement and language anxiety significantly reduce students' willingness to practice grammatical structures. English

lessons fared slightly better, with a higher percentage of students reporting that grammar was useful but boring rather than entirely confusing, suggesting that students may at least see English grammar as more relevant to their daily communication needs (Hudson, 2001). The relatively higher percentage of students who found MFL grammar confusing corroborates Doughty and Williams' (1998) claim that form-focused instruction in foreign languages must be carefully scaffolded to avoid cognitive overload. Additionally, a small but significant number of students deemed grammar irrelevant altogether, echoing Carter's (1990) observation that students often fail to connect formal grammar learning with authentic language use. These perceptions are likely exacerbated by a lack of consistent terminology between English and MFL departments, which Borg (1999) argues can leave learners disoriented and discouraged. The overall pattern of responses suggests that improving student attitudes toward grammar will require not only more engaging pedagogical approaches but also a reframing of grammar as a meaningful and empowering aspect of language study rather than as a dry technical exercise.
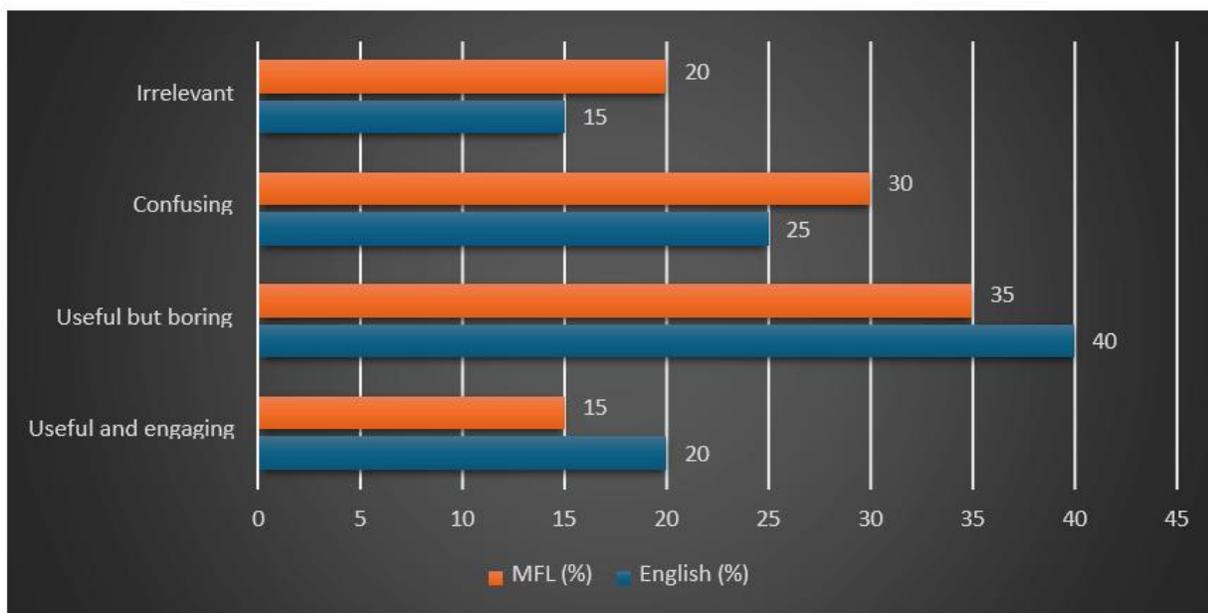

Figure 3. Student Perceptions of Grammar Lessons

Discussion

The results of this study provide compelling evidence that emotional engagement is a key determinant of students' success in grammar learning across both English and Modern Foreign Language (MFL) classrooms. The consistent decline in grammar scores from Year 7 through Year 11 is not only a cognitive phenomenon but also reflects affective disengagement that grows over time. As Halliday (1985)

emphasizes, grammar is not simply a set of rules but a meaning-making resource, and when students fail to perceive grammar as meaningful, their willingness to engage diminishes. The finding that students associate grammar less with MFL than with English is particularly significant because it suggests that grammatical knowledge is not being effectively transferred between subjects. Hawkins (1984) argued that cross-linguistic awareness can be a powerful tool for supporting second language acquisition, yet the data from this study indicate that many students do not view grammar as a unifying concept across languages. This compartmentalization reinforces Pachler's (2000) claim that the lack of cross-departmental coordination weakens the potential for metalinguistic development.

The negative emotional responses reported by students, particularly boredom and confusion, align with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, which suggests that negative emotions can block language input from being fully processed. If students approach grammar lessons with anxiety or a sense of futility, their cognitive resources are diverted away from deep learning. Wright (1999) noted that grammar lessons often fail to motivate students because they are presented in a decontextualized and mechanical manner. The prevalence of students describing grammar as boring but useful in English lessons suggests that while they understand its importance, the delivery may lack sufficient engagement to stimulate intrinsic motivation. This finding supports the call by Doughty and Williams (1998) for integrating form-focused instruction within communicative tasks so that grammar becomes meaningful and purposeful rather than an isolated technical exercise.

Teacher perspectives also play an important role in shaping student attitudes. Borg (1999) observed that many teachers feel underprepared to teach grammar, which can lead to either avoidance of explicit grammar teaching or over-reliance on mechanical exercises. When teachers lack confidence or clarity in their approach, students are likely to perceive grammar as confusing or irrelevant. Andrews (1999) proposed that a shift toward conceptualizing grammar as a resource for expressing meaning can empower teachers to move beyond rule-recitation toward more exploratory and interactive approaches. This study's findings that students in MFL classes reported higher levels of confusion suggest that such a reconceptualization is particularly necessary in foreign language teaching, where grammatical structures can appear alien or overly abstract if not linked to familiar concepts from the students' first language (Grenfell, 1996).

Another important dimension highlighted by these results is the issue of consistency across departments. Brumfit (1995) argued that the failure to use common terminology and teaching approaches across English and MFL creates unnecessary cognitive barriers for students. The data showing that nearly one-fifth of students do not associate grammar with either subject underline the urgency of developing a shared grammatical metalanguage that would allow students to build a coherent mental framework. Carter (1990)

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argued that grammar education should aim to foster conscious language awareness rather than rote memorization. A coordinated approach between departments could not only reduce confusion but also strengthen students' ability to transfer knowledge between languages, an outcome that research by Mitchell (1994) suggests improves overall language competence.

The emotional dimension of grammar learning also has long-term implications for students' academic trajectories. Arnold and Brown (1999) noted that persistent negative affect in language learning can lead to a cycle of avoidance, where students participate less and thus receive less feedback, further entrenching their lack of confidence. The decline in grammar performance across year groups in this study suggests that this cycle may already be in operation for some learners by the time they reach Key Stage 4. Interventions to break this cycle must therefore target both cognitive and affective dimensions of grammar teaching. As Field (2000) emphasizes, creating a supportive and low-anxiety learning environment can lower the affective filter and increase willingness to experiment with grammatical forms.

Taken together, these findings point to the need for a pedagogical shift that integrates grammar meaningfully into communicative activities, builds bridges between English and MFL grammar instruction, and actively fosters positive emotional engagement. This requires professional development for teachers that equips them with both the theoretical understanding and practical strategies for teaching grammar in a way that is engaging and relevant. By reframing grammar as a resource for empowering students to express complex ideas and make cross-linguistic connections, educators can move beyond the view of grammar as a dry technical subject. This reorientation has the potential not only to arrest the decline in grammar performance but also to cultivate students who are motivated, confident, and capable language users across multiple domains.

Recommendations

In light of the findings and discussion, it is essential to reconceptualize grammar teaching as an integrated, meaningful, and emotionally engaging component of language education. One key recommendation is the development of a shared grammatical metalanguage across English and MFL departments. Brumfit (1995) and Pachler (2000) emphasize that consistent terminology helps students make cross-linguistic connections, which strengthens metalinguistic awareness and facilitates knowledge transfer. Collaborative planning between departments could lead to a more coherent curriculum in which grammatical concepts are introduced progressively and revisited at key stages to ensure consolidation. Furthermore, grammar instruction should be embedded within communicative and context-rich activities that allow learners to see grammar as a tool for expressing ideas rather than as an abstract set of rules. Approaches such as focus- on-

form within meaningful tasks, as recommended by Doughty and Williams (1998), can increase student motivation and make grammatical study more relevant.

Teacher professional development is another critical component of reform. Borg (1999) highlights that many teachers feel underprepared to teach grammar confidently and engagingly, which can lead to student confusion and disengagement. Targeted training should therefore focus on equipping teachers with strategies to lower students' affective filters, such as scaffolding complex concepts, providing frequent formative feedback, and using examples that connect to students' linguistic and cultural experiences. Creating a classroom environment that values experimentation with language and frames mistakes as part of learning can help reduce anxiety and encourage participation. By combining these pedagogical strategies with systemic curricular alignment, schools can transform grammar from a source of frustration into an empowering resource that supports literacy, foreign language acquisition, and overall communicative competence. Such an approach is likely to reverse the decline in grammar performance while simultaneously enhancing students' emotional engagement with language learning.

Future Research

Future research should build on the insights provided by this study and pursue longitudinal investigations into how emotional engagement with grammar evolves throughout secondary education. Ehigie (2025) highlights the importance of designing cross-curricular frameworks that bridge the divide between English and MFL instruction, suggesting that future studies could empirically test the implementation of such frameworks over several academic years to measure their impact on both cognitive outcomes and student motivation. Similarly, research by Ehigie (2025) on grammar deficits impacting foreign language acquisition points to the value of intervention studies that address these deficits early in Key Stage 3, tracking their effects on subsequent performance in French and Spanish. These studies could adopt mixed-methods approaches to capture the nuanced relationship between grammar knowledge, emotional engagement, and language learning outcomes.

Beyond the UK context, comparative research could explore how different cultural and educational systems handle the integration of grammar instruction, taking cues from studies like Olúgúnlè, Braimoh, and Ehigie (2025), which examine teacher-student dynamics in literary education. Cross-cultural investigations might reveal whether emotional disengagement with grammar is a uniquely British phenomenon or a broader issue affecting global language pedagogy. Future work could also examine the potential of technology and artificial intelligence to support grammar learning, as suggested by Ehigie (2025) in his study of AI for dyslexic learners, focusing on adaptive grammar tools that personalize feedback and reduce learner anxiety. Incorporating psychosocial perspectives, as seen in Fuseini et al. (2022) and Salaudeen and Olúgúnlè

(2022), could further illuminate the role of affective factors, resilience, and identity in shaping grammar learning trajectories.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of emotional engagement in grammar learning across English and Modern Foreign Language (MFL) classrooms. The progressive decline in grammar performance from Year 7 to Year 11 indicates that grammatical competence cannot be sustained through isolated or fragmented instruction. Students' perceptions of grammar as boring, confusing, or irrelevant highlight the urgent need to reframe grammar teaching as meaningful and empowering. These results support previous arguments that grammar should be viewed as a resource for communication and self-expression rather than as a punitive or purely technical aspect of language study (Carter, 1990; Andrews, 1999). When learners experience grammar as a disconnected set of rules, their motivation decreases, and their ability to transfer grammatical knowledge between English and MFL weakens, ultimately limiting their broader linguistic development (Hawkins, 1984; Pachler, 2000).

A coherent response to these challenges must involve both curricular reform and pedagogical innovation. Developing a shared grammatical metalanguage across departments, embedding grammar within communicative tasks, and providing targeted professional development for teachers are crucial steps toward improving both performance and emotional engagement. Such systemic changes would allow students to perceive grammar as relevant to multiple domains, strengthening their confidence and willingness to engage. The evidence suggests that when grammar is taught in a way that is engaging, collaborative, and connected to real communication, learners are more likely to develop sustained competence and positive attitudes. This research therefore contributes to a growing call for integrated, student-centered approaches that view grammar not as an obstacle but as a powerful tool for linguistic growth and academic success.

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