

You get it or you don't: Attitudes and experiences in teaching and learning syntax

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We report on a study that investigates the pedagogy of syntax teaching and how syntax is perceived by both students and instructors. The aim of the study is to determine whether there is an asymmetry between syntax and other subjects in linguistics education (as sometimes observed anecdotally), and potentially informing future best practices for syntax teaching. Focusing on linguistics education in Canada, the UK, and the US, the full study surveys (a) linguistics programs/departments, (b) instructors, and (c) undergraduate and graduate students. This presentation reports the results of (a) and (b) using data collected Autumn–Winter 2023–2024.

Though there is a growing field investigating teaching and learning across scientific disciplines (cf. McDonald 2016), there is comparatively little focused on linguistics, and yet less on syntax (with occasional exceptions such as Lasnik 2013). Negative student experiences are sometimes attributed by instructors to syntax being a 'difficult subject'. Additionally, there is a common assumption that more academically able students will self-select into more 'difficult' subjects (Leslie 2003), but research has shown that social factors (including race, gender, and class) strongly influence which students choose to pursue such fields (Shiner & Noden 2015). Millar (1991) notes that the sciences are generally seen as 'hard subjects' due in part to more abstract content but also significantly to choices made in how science is taught. Our mixed methods study investigates the perception of teaching and learning syntax for syntax instructors and students, and the relationship between those perceptions and the positive or negative experiences of students in syntax classrooms.

Part (a), our program survey, confirmed that syntax is treated as a 'core' subfield, as reflected in required courses in both undergraduate and graduate programs; this was also present to some extent in the feelings of respondents to the instructor survey. However, a wide range of opinions regarding the 'importance' of the subject was present, and these more nuanced themes are presented in our talk along with the results of this large-scale survey.

The results of our previous pilot study ($n = 306$, April–June 2023) indicate that while some participants do find syntax difficult this is by no means a universal perception (mean = 2.8 out of 5). Additionally, those who agree that syntax is difficult are less likely to agree that syntax is fun ($p < 0.001$). Instructors said that it was important to teach syntax in a rigorous way (mean = 3.6 out of 5). However, they also said that it was important to teach it in an *accessible* way (mean = 4.7). The pilot study did not define *accessible*; future work will explore in greater detail what underlies this attitude.

In free response comments, participants noted additional issues, including experiences of racism and misogyny in syntax classroom environments. One participant, for example, commented: "*I love syntax! Black linguists aren't allowed to be syntacticians.*" Another respondent described their syntax classroom as "*the class most dominated by men in my entire linguistics degree.*" Other themes identified in the comments include both positive and negative reports on specific pedagogical methods. These themes are explored in more depth in the instructor survey, results of which are presented in this paper ($n = 227$ at time of abstract submission).

The results of our project so far largely align with anecdotal perceptions in the field, yet with interesting points of detail (e.g. rigour vs. accessibility) and confirming points of concern (e.g. representation of marginalized linguists). The value of these results is providing a more solid foundation for curricular and pedagogical development in our field, potentially contributing to growing linguistics education in universities and schools, and better outreach.

References

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