

PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF GRAMMAR

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ABSTRACT

The continued emphasis on grammar in the teaching and learning of English is reflected in the new Singapore English Language Syllabus 2010. As teachers play a central role in facilitating students' mastery of the English language, this preliminary study seeks to investigate pre-service teachers' beliefs about the teaching and learning of grammar in Singapore. Towards this end, responses to a written reflection task and a questionnaire adopted and adapted from Chia (2003) are collated for analysis. Insights from the data may contribute to increased awareness if such beliefs are aligned to the requirements of the new English Language Syllabus 2010, and if not, help to identify and address the gaps.

Introduction

The English Language Syllabus 2010 in Singapore continues to recognise the central role grammar plays in the teaching and learning of English in school as its predecessor, the English Language Syllabus 2001, did. This recognition reflects the emphasis on both accuracy and fluency in language instruction. This balanced approach is a refreshing departure from the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach that the English Language Syllabus 1991 was partly predicated on. Under the English Language (EL) Syllabus 1991, language or grammar items were chosen to match the communicative functions to be taught. As such, the emphasis was on function over form as well as fluency over accuracy. Over time, a decline in the accurate use of English becomes serious. In an effort to address the decline in the standard of English due to the influence of Singapore Colloquial English (SCE), more popularly known as Singlish, the government has put in place various measures and initiatives. One of them is the Speak Good English Movement to encourage Singaporeans to speak grammatically correct English that is universally understood. In this light, the sustained emphasis on grammar in the EL Syllabus 2010 can be seen as a response to the predicament.

Such a revival may pose some difficulties to National Institute of Education (NIE) pre-service student teachers taking a one-year Post Graduate Diploma in Education for Secondary School course (PGDE – Secondary). This is because

the CLT approach which they were exposed to as students may bear upon their beliefs about classroom practices. The CLT approach was conceived in the West in the 1960s. As its popularity grows in Eastern countries, it has an important bearing on their syllabi (Chung, 2005). In this regard, recognising the central role of pre-service teachers' prior experience, Bullough (1991) states that "prior knowledge serves as a filter through which the student responds to teacher education" (p. 43). As such, the objectives of this study are twofold. Firstly, it hopes to uncover pre-service student teachers' beliefs about the teaching and learning of grammar. Secondly, it helps these student teachers reflect on their beliefs, some of which may be sub-conscious. Such reflection helps to bring these beliefs to the surface for them to reassess and re-evaluate in the light of their teacher education.

There is a need to understand what guides teachers in their decision-making, since teachers' classroom practices largely hinge on their beliefs (Munby, 1982; Shavelson & Stern, 1981; Wittrock, 1986). However, Ng and Farrell (2003) observe that there is a huge gap in studies on the beliefs and classroom practices of English language teachers. This is especially so in studies on English language teachers' beliefs and actual practices in the area of grammar teaching. As such, the current study attempts to identify the gap and shed some light in this area.

The Importance of Teachers' Beliefs

In this study, grammar refers to the body of rules which underlie a language, and this covers rules that govern the structure of words, clauses and sentences (Cross, 1991, p. 26). Teachers' beliefs in this study refer to those beliefs that are related to their teaching and pedagogy. (Borg, 2001; Pajares, 1992). Kagan (1992) defines teachers' beliefs as "tacit, often unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms and the academic material to be taught" (p. 65). She further adds that teachers' beliefs have an important bearing on the instruction they provide to students

On the importance of understanding teachers' beliefs, Johnson (1994, p. 439) outlines the following three assumptions that underlie teachers' beliefs:

- (1) Teachers' beliefs affect perception and judgment.
- (2) Teachers' beliefs are reflected in classroom practices.
- (3) There is a need to understand teachers' beliefs with a view to improving teaching practices and teacher education programmes.

As to what shapes teachers' beliefs, Shulman (1987) points out that pre-service teachers do come with their own prior beliefs, some of which can be traced back to their past experience as students themselves. It is through these beliefs that

pre-service teachers process the content of the teacher development programme (Richards, 1998). Such a process may be facilitative if the beliefs converge with the programme content.

Self-Reflection as an Effective Teaching Practice

Central to the characteristics of an effective teacher or student teacher is the ability to reflect on his or her beliefs with regard to the teaching and learning of grammar. This process is the first step for student teachers to better see how these beliefs inform their response to teacher education. This is because more often than not, such beliefs are deeply entrenched and buried in the subconscious. Self-reflection in the form of a questionnaire in this study provides student teachers with the tool to excavate their beliefs for further re-examination. As observed by Leong and Mardziah (2007), “prior knowledge and skills are part of our credible selves that exist to assist us but are somehow hidden when we try to retrieve them to explain to others” (p. 35).

In this regard, Johnson (1999) highlights the importance for teachers to reflect on their teaching practices. This helps them to bring to light their subconscious beliefs and subsequently re-examine how these beliefs inform their classroom practices. The process involves questioning their own beliefs as a means for improvement in teaching methods. On the value of self-reflection, teacher education courses “should aim to provide space and means by which student teachers can bring up and examine their pre-training knowledge in order to see how it relates to teacher education knowledge, so that learning is more meaningful” (Almarza, 1996, pp. 73-74). It is this objective that the current study is partly based on.

Bailey et al. (1996) recognise the role played by school teachers as they point out that “if it is true that we teach the way we have been taught, rather than as we have been trained to teach, then we are bound to perpetuate the models we have learned in our own teaching” (p. 11). They proceed to advance methods of breaking this vicious cycle by bringing “our past experience to the level of consciousness” (p. 11), hence, the importance of self-reflection.

A Review of Past Research

Chia (2003) investigated primary school teachers’ beliefs about grammar teaching and learning by administering a questionnaire to 96 teachers taking the Singapore-Cambridge Certificate in the Teaching of Grammar Course. Among the findings it was discovered that the teachers’ perception of what works well bears on the way they teach grammar. Many of them also hold onto the traditional practice of drilling students in grammar despite the emphasis on teaching grammar in meaningful contexts in their teacher training. Such a disjuncture can be attributed to the examination-oriented education system in which teachers are pressured to help more students pass

their examinations (Cheah, 1998). Borg (1998) observed an experienced teacher of English as a foreign language and examined how his belief system informed his L2 classroom practice in the area of grammar teaching.

In the Singapore context, Yim (1993) conducted a survey with 70 secondary teachers about grammar learning and teaching. The findings reinforce the belief that grammar teaching is a vital area that should be given special attention and prominent coverage. In another study in Singapore, Farrell (1999) investigated five Singapore pre-service teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching. The findings correspond with the results of other studies that show that these pre-service teachers join a teacher education programme with prior experiences and beliefs that bear upon their classroom practices. However, these prior experiences "may be resistant to change" (p. 3). Deploying a qualitative approach, Ng and Farrell (2003) examined four Singapore secondary school teachers' beliefs to uncover the match or co-relation between their beliefs and their actual classroom practices.

In another context, Richards, Ho and Giblin (1996) found that there is a positive co-relation between novice teachers' personal theories and their perception of their teaching. Calderhead and Robertson (1991) attribute pre-service teachers' inertia in restructuring their beliefs to their lack of knowledge about how to adjust their beliefs about teachers and teaching. Addressing this problem, Farrell (1999) incorporates self-reflection in his study to unlock pre-service English teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching. Through self-reflection, he hoped to bring to the surface these teachers' prior experiences to be evaluated together with alternative views presented in the course.

Research Questions

This study aims to uncover pre-service student teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching and learning. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What are the reasons student teachers give for teaching grammar?
- (2) What should be the focus / scope of grammar instruction as perceived by student teachers?
- (3) What are the factors that influence the way student teachers teach grammar?
- (4) How do student teachers teach grammar according to their preferred approaches?
- (5) How do student teachers perceive grammar instruction in relation to the teaching of writing skill and strategies?
- (6) Where do student teachers stand in matters related to the importance of metalanguage in the teaching of grammar?

Methodology

A questionnaire was administered to 39 first semester student teachers who had just embarked on a one-year Post Graduate Diploma in Education for Secondary School (PGDE – Secondary) in the National Institute of Singapore (NIE) in the January 2010 intake. This questionnaire was administered in a content upgrading course called *QUE 513 Pedagogical Grammar of English* that aims to equip student teachers with the necessary grammar metalanguage.

The questionnaire was administered midway through the course, and student teachers were given one week to carefully reflect on their responses to the statements before returning the questionnaire. Tables 1 and 2 provide a profile of the student teachers in terms of their age range and years of experience in teaching English respectively:

Table 1: Respondents' Age Range

Age	No. of respondents
Less than 25 years old	18
From 25 to 30	12
From 31 to 35	2
From 36 to 40	3
From 40 to 45	4
Above 45 years old	0
Total	39

Table 2 : Respondents' Years of English Teaching Experience

Age	No. of respondents
None	7
Less than 6 months	19
From 6 months to 1 year	12
From 1 year to 2 years	1
From 2 years to 3 years	0
Total	39

The questionnaire was adopted and adapted from a similar instrument used by Chia (2003). Some changes were made in terms of additional questions and rephrasing of some statements. For each of the statements, student teachers were presented with

five options i.e. 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neutral', 'disagree', 'strongly disagree' with the following corresponding abbreviations for ease of reference in this study: SA, A, N, D, SA. They were required to tick a box for each of the statements to indicate their answer. To lend voice to the respondents' answers in the questionnaire, they were also asked to briefly reflect and share their comments on the teaching and learning of grammar at the end of the questionnaire. Their written reflections provide some insights into their beliefs, some of which are quoted in the analysis section. Codes are used when quoting their written reflections. The items in the questionnaire are presented in the next section together with the responses.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results and discussion under the six main statements in the questionnaire with accompanying tables and quotations from student teachers. To facilitate discussion and reference, the responses are grouped into two main categories i.e. SA & A and D & SD in the tables that accompany the discussion. There are two sets of figures: one indicating the percentage (%) and the other the actual number of participants (no.).

Question 1: Reasons for Teaching Grammar

As Table 3 shows, ranked highest among the reasons cited by the respondents (NIE student teachers) for teaching grammar is its application in writing with 95% in agreement. Such emphasis on accuracy and focus on form in writing is also reflected in speaking as 92% are of the view that fluency and accuracy go hand in hand for effective oral communication. The following comments by the respondents bear testimony to this belief:

I feel that teachers should ... highlight the importance of grammar to students, as having good knowledge of grammar is the pre-requisite to speaking and writing good English. (ST 21)

It will help students become more effective in their communication and give them the tool to express themselves clearly. This is especially important when they go out into [sic] the workplace. It is a major concern of employers now [sic] that often Singaporeans [sic] written and spoken language seems to have become less than adequate. (ST 34)

Helping students to spot their own mistakes is also one of the top reasons with 92% in agreement. In this regard, the respondents are of the view that the teaching of grammar equips students with their own grammar monitor which helps them with self-editing in the process of writing. This helps to empower students with the ability to be responsible for their own learning. Such a sentiment can be observed in the following comment:

I feel that learning grammar is important for students to understand their own mistakes and work on them.... (ST 23)

Preparing students for examination constitutes a prime motivation for the teaching of grammar with 90% in agreement. This is predictable as teachers are under tremendous pressure to produce good results in the examination oriented culture of Singapore in which teachers are held accountable to various stake holders.

Equipping students with the language (terminologies) to talk about grammar ranks the lowest with only 67% of the respondents citing this as the reason for teaching grammar. Such an observation is perhaps due to the fact that this involves higher order thinking skill which the respondents believe most of their students may have difficulty in attaining. As students are still struggling with identifying and correcting their grammar errors, the respondents may see their priority as teachers is to attend to such urgent needs. For example, they may want to make sure that their students are able to understand and apply grammar rules in their writing.

Table 3: Reasons for Teaching Grammar

Statements	SA & A		D & SD	
	(%)	(no.)	(%)	(no.)
1 I believe that students need to be taught grammar rules and terminology in order to:				
(a) apply them in their <u>writing</u> .	94.9	37	5.1	2
(b) <u>speak</u> Standard English.	92.3	36	5.1	2
(c) prepare them for grammar items / structures needed in the <u>examinations</u> .	89.8	35	5.1	2
(d) spot their own <u>mistakes</u> .	92.3	36	2.6	1
(e) give them a means to <u>talk</u> about the language.	66.6	26	12.9	5

Question 2: Grammar Items to Teach

The majority (69%) of the respondents are mindful of the importance of only teaching grammatical rules that are problematic to their students (see Table 4). They see error analysis (negative feedback) occupying an important place in their classroom practices.

There are many possible reasons for this preference, the chief of which is the belief that students learn better from their own mistakes, and teachers are expected to go through students' mistakes. However, this has to be done with caution for it to be

effective. For instance, teachers should only cover common mistakes students make so as not to overwhelm them by correcting every single mistake which may in the process, demotivate their students.

Another possible reason is that the EL Syllabus 2010 prescribes a spiral and recursive approach in which all the basic grammar rules are covered at the primary school level. Teachers at secondary school level revisit, reinforce and revise such rules by paying attention to recurring errors made by students. These respondents will eventually be recruited into the secondary school education system.

Only 49% of the respondents share the belief that they only teach grammar rules prescribed by the English Language syllabus. Is this notably low percentage a reflection of the respondents' reluctance in adhering to the syllabus? This is a question that begs to be answered. One possible explanation is that the respondents see themselves playing a more meaningful role by transcending what is prescribed by the syllabus. Instead, they see themselves in a better position in facilitating students' learning of grammar rules by providing relevant and personalised feedback on students' writing, hence the high percentage that are in favour of error analysis.

Table 4: Grammar Items to Teach

Statements	SA & A		D & SD	
	(%)	(no.)	(%)	(no.)
2 I will only teach grammar rules that are:				
(a) prescribed by the English Language syllabus.	48.7	19	15.4	6
(b) problematic to my students i.e. going through their grammar errors.	69.2	27	12.9	5

Question 3: Factors Influencing Grammar Teaching

All the respondents (97%), save for one, agree that their knowledge of grammar has an important bearing on the way they teach grammar (see Table 5). In other words, the way they teach grammar is based on their understanding of grammar and their confidence in such knowledge.

Most of the respondents (97%) do not dispute the value of well tried and tested methods, and they do not hesitate to use them in the classroom. The response to this item was overwhelming with only one respondent remaining neutral and none showing any disagreement.

How respondents were trained to teach grammar ranks second (69%) among the factors that determine the way they teach grammar. This can be attributed to the fact that the respondents are pre-service teachers who have not undergone any teacher training. As such, the only training they might be referring to is their experience of the short contract teaching they did prior to joining the PGDE programme in NIE.

Some respondents do see the impact of the instruction they received as students in schools in shaping the way they replicate such approaches in their teaching of grammar. However, this factor ranks the lowest among the four factors with 41% of the respondents sharing the belief and 26% voicing a negative response.

Upon further investigation based on their answers to a written reflection task, it is found that some conceded that they could not remember learning grammar or being taught grammar in schools. This may be due to the CLT approach which was prevalent in the eighties and nineties.

Table 5: Factors Influencing Grammar Teaching

Statements	SA & A		D & SD	
	(%)	(no.)	(%)	(no.)
3 The way I teach grammar is determined by:				
(a) my <u>knowledge</u> .	97.4	38	2.6	1
(b) my <u>perception</u> of what works well in the classroom.	97.4	38	0	0
(c) how I <u>learnt grammar as a student</u> in schools from my teachers.	41.1	16	25.6	10
(d) how I was <u>trained</u> to teach grammar.	69.2	27	7.7	3

Question 4: Approaches to Grammar Teaching

A resounding 97% of the respondents are in favour of integrating grammar into activities such as speaking and writing instead of teaching grammar in isolation (see Table 6). Another 90% are of the view that grammar should be taught through tasks or activities related to a topic or communicative function. In this regard, another 79% share the belief in the efficacy of contextualising the teaching of grammar using texts as practice. This is in line with the EL Syllabus 2010 which advocates the teaching of grammar through text types. The reflection below illustrates the results:

Grammar should be taught in context of situation or activities It is important for students to speak and write well and they have to understand the importance of grammar in achieving proficiency in the language. (ST 2)

However, the respondents do take on board the benefits of other approaches: 87% of the respondents agree to a combination of the communicative and traditional approaches; 79% of the respondents see the need to teach grammar in isolation depending on the contexts; 74% of them are open to the incidental teaching of grammar. All these are indicative of the respondents' readiness and resilience in adopting and adapting various approaches to cater to the different needs of their students. This can be detected in the comment below:

...teaching grammar is a tricky task which needs to be mastered well. It is important for teachers to know what methods works [sic] in teaching grammar in various situations in order not to confuse students. (ST 15)

On the teaching of new grammatical items, most of the respondents prefer the inductive approach to the deductive approach. In this regard, 72% are in favour of developing activities that expose students to the language in use with the aim of discovery of rules by students themselves. This is in contrast to only 59% who take to teaching rules explicitly followed by activities and tasks. Such reservations and ambivalence about the benefits of explicit teaching of grammar again resurfaces when only 54% think that weaker students will benefit from more explicit teaching of grammar rules than better students. This is despite some of the advantages of this rule-driven approach such as time-saving, acknowledgement of learner's intelligence and the role of cognitive processes in language acquisition. Ultimately, the efficacy of such an approach hinges on "the quality of the actual rule explanation" (Thornbury, 2009, p. 32).

The belief in self discovery surfaces when 67% agrees that students learn grammar rules better when they discover the rules themselves. However, they are cautiously optimistic about this approach, as only 54% think that if students discover grammar rules themselves, they will be able to work out other grammar rules in the future. As observed by Ng and Chia (2007), an adapted version of guided discovery is more appropriate for low proficiency students. In such guided discovery, the teacher can elicit the rule from students rather than tell students the rule.

Respondents are divided on the effectiveness of explicit teaching of grammar through drilling, sentences and exercises. As can be seen, only 56% are in favour of the explicit teaching of grammar, and the same number of respondents believe that teaching grammar is all about practising the correct forms in drills, sentences and exercises. The following reflection is an indication of the sentiment against the teaching of grammar through drills:

Grammar is best taught through practices and exercises, reading and conversing / listening to radio. The rules are given as supplementary for their information. Objective [sic] is to apply the rules. Hence I feel it is better to train them through more exposure of [sic] the language. Drilling the rules may lose their interest in the subject. (ST 32)

Also, only 54% hold the belief that drilling students in the patterns of grammar usage helps them remember the rules. A large percentage, in the region of 25% to 26%, remains indifferent to such an approach.

We are well aware of the on-going bipolar debate between the explicit or deductive approach on one hand, and the implicit or inductive approach to the teaching of grammar on the other. In this study, the respondents gravitate towards the implicit and inductive approach, integrating the teaching of grammar into language skills such as speaking and writing as well as communicative activities. They voice reservation about the pure inductive approach that encourages self-discovery of rules, as they do not think that this will help students in discovering other grammatical rules. Explicit and deductive teaching of grammar ranks rather low in their preferences. Such a reservation may be due to their own experience and exposure to this approach. They are cautious when voicing their agreement on the value of teaching grammar through sentences and exercises that are divorced from texts and contexts.

Table 6 : Approaches to Grammar Teaching

Statements	SA & A		D & SD	
	(%)	(no.)	(%)	(no.)
4 I believe that:				
(a) <u>drilling</u> students in the patterns of grammar usage helps them remember the rules.	53.8	21	18	7
(b) teaching grammar is all about practising the use of correct forms in <u>drills, sentences and exercises</u> .	56.4	22	18	7
(c) students learn grammar rules better when the rules are taught to them <u>explicitly</u> .	56.4	22	15.4	6
(d) <u>weaker students</u> will benefit from more <u>explicit teaching</u> of grammar rules than better students.	53.8	21	18	7
(e) teaching grammar is best achieved through examining how words function in different <u>contexts using texts</u> as practices.	79.4	31	5.2	2
(f) students learn grammar rules better when they <u>discover the rules</u> themselves.	66.7	26	7.7	3

(g)	if students discover <u>grammar rules themselves</u> , they will be able to <u>work out other grammar rules</u> in the future	53.8	21	10.3	4
(h)	there is a place for the <u>incidental teaching of grammar</u> to meet the needs of students.	74.3	29	2.6	1
(i)	grammar should be <u>integrated into other activities</u> like speaking and writing.	97.4	38	0	0
(j)	most of the time, grammar should be taught through tasks or activities related to a <u>topic or a communicative function</u> .	89.7	35	0	0
(k)	grammar is best taught by combining the <u>communicative and traditional approaches</u> .	87.1	34	2.6	1
(l)	<u>sometimes</u> , there is a need for grammar to be taught in <u>isolation</u> .	79.4	31	5.2	2
(m)	when presenting <u>new</u> grammar structures to students, I prefer to teach rules <u>explicitly</u> followed by activities and tasks. (deductive approach)	58.9	23	18	7
(n)	when presenting <u>new</u> grammar structures to students, I prefer to develop <u>activities</u> that expose students to the language in use with the aim of <u>discovery</u> of rules by students themselves. (inductive approach)	71.7	28	5.2	2

Question 5: Teaching Grammar in Writing

The majority of the respondents (95%) are in support of giving grammatical feedback related to students' compositions (see Table 7). Such negative feedback is more meaningful and efficacious as this may better facilitate the internalisation of rules, thus helping students to self identify and correct their own errors. As editing is part and parcel of the writing process, the provision of timely grammar intervention in the form of error correction will definitely help students to become adept writers. The following utterance reaffirms this belief:

I believe that grammar is best taught by discussing relevant examples in context. On top of that, going through the grammatical errors present in students' compositions is equally crucial, as these errors are made by students themselves. They would, hopefully, remember the rules better that way. (ST 24)

In a related study by Farrell and Lee (2003), the benefits of providing grammatical feedback can be maximised if teachers are flexible enough to consider various techniques instead of insisting on a particular technique. For instance, teachers can use the following grammatical feedback techniques in combination: written

symbols, classroom-wide grammatical feedback and written grammar explanation. The importance of providing grammatical feedback on students' compositions is reiterated when the majority (95%) justify that this is a good practice that should be encouraged. The failure to do this may lead to students' errors becoming habits that are difficult to change, leading to error fossilization. Elaborating on grammatical feedback, the respondents are ambivalent about the nature of correction. Should the teacher correct every single error in students' compositions? 51% are not convinced while 33% are in favour despite the extra work on the teachers' part. This may be attributed to the demotivating effect it may have on weak and low proficiency students which in turn defeats the purpose of the whole exercise. A better alternative is to focus on correcting commonly made mistakes by students so that the feedback is more focused and meaningful.

In the area of striving for grammatical perfection in students' compositions, the respondents take a more accommodating view with 44% advocating a pedantically purist view, 26% privileging functions over forms and 31% remaining indifferent. In other words, 57% do not hold a very strong view on the need to have perfect grammar to write good compositions. This may underscore the focus on other writing skills and mechanics beyond grammar such as content, cohesion / development of ideas, paragraphing, elaboration with specific examples and the formulation of thesis statements and topic sentences. The view that writing is more than just about grammar is again indicated when only 18% hold the view that in teaching writing, grammar takes priority over ideas and a notable 59% are in opposition. In short, many of the respondents are in favour of a balanced focus between grammar and content in the teaching of writing. They are justifiably selective in providing grammatical feedback related to students' compositions so as not to overwhelm students with too many corrections.

Table 7 : Teaching Grammar in Writing

Statements	SA & A		D & SD	
	(%)	(no.)	(%)	(no.)
5 Teaching students to <u>write</u> grammatically correct English:				
(a) is more important than teaching them to develop or express their <u>ideas</u> clearly.	18	7	59	23
(b) and to express their <u>ideas</u> clearly are just as important.	92.2	36	5.2	2

(c)	is important as students need to have <u>perfect grammar</u> to write good composition.	43.6	17	25.7	10
(d)	is important as I believe that giving grammatical <u>feedback</u> related to students' compositions is helpful.	94.9	37	0	0
(e)	is important and if I don't correct students' grammatical <u>errors</u> in their compositions, they will become habits that are difficult to <u>change</u> .	94.9	37	5.2	2
(f)	is important but I don't like to correct <u>EVERY</u> grammatical error in students' compositions.	51.3	20	33.3	13

Question 6: Student Teachers' Grammar Knowledge

As shown in Table 8, the majority of the respondents (77%) do not dispute the need to equip themselves with the necessary grammar metalanguage in order for them to function effectively in teaching grammar. This is a clear indication of the relevance of the *QUE 513 Pedagogical Grammar of English* course that they are taking, a content upgrading course that equips the respondents with grammar metalanguage. Such a realisation is captured in the following comments:

It is important for teachers to know the metalanguage and grammatical rules, but they have to 'translate' the terms and rules to layman speak, so that it is easier for students to grasp the concepts and remember the rules.... (ST 9)

....this course has equipped me with new grammar knowledge and I feel more confident to teach it if the need arises. (ST 23)

In this regard, a notable number of the respondents (79%) would like to apply the metalanguage they have acquired in this course to identifying and correcting grammatical errors in students' compositions when they go out to teach in schools. They see the value of grammar metalanguage in helping them to discuss grammar with their students using a common language understood by all.

Although the respondents realise the importance of such metalanguage, their confidence level is not high enough for them to teach, use and explain grammar terminologies to their students. Only 36% of them are reasonably confident whereas 33% express reservations about their ability. This is understandable, as they are pre-service teachers who have just embarked on a post-graduate diploma in education course. The following remark indirectly illustrates such an admission:

I believe that I will be more equipped to teach English to my students if I have proper grammatical knowledge. I will be able to answer any questions that they may have as we [sic] explain concepts to them.... (ST 1)

It is clear from here that their low confidence level in teaching grammar is due to their lack of knowledge. Ambivalent responses were anticipated when 31% agreed with the view that teaching grammatical terminologies only confuses students even though the EL Syllabus 2010 clearly lists out the grammatical terminologies to be taught to students. Another 33% of the respondents are comfortable and confident enough to see the value in teaching grammatical terminologies.

In short, the respondents do realise that there is a gap between the importance of equipping themselves with grammar metalanguage and their lack of confidence in articulating such knowledge to their students due to their inadequacy. As such, they do see the relevance of the *QUE 513 Pedagogical Grammar of English* course in helping them bridge this knowledge gap before embarking on other pedagogical courses on the teaching of language skills.

Table 8 : Student Teachers' Grammar Knowledge

Statements	SA & A		D & SD	
	(%)	(no.)	(%)	(no.)
6 I believe that:				
(a) it is important for an English teacher to have the knowledge of the <u>metalanguage</u> in teaching grammar such as <i>finite and non-finite verbs, predicative adjectives, compound and complex sentences.</i>	76.9	30	5.2	2
(b) knowing the different grammatical terms helps me in identifying and <u>correcting grammatical errors</u> in students' compositions.	79.4	31	7.7	3
(c) I possess adequate <u>knowledge</u> to teach grammatical terminologies.	35.9	14	33.3	13
(d) teaching grammatical terminologies only <u>confuses</u> students.	30.8	12	33.3	13

English Language Syllabus 2010

The EL Syllabus 2010 continues to give recognition to the importance of grammar in the teaching and learning of the English language. As such, significant emphasis is placed on grammar in the new syllabus.

At primary level, the syllabus lays down the basic foundation in grammar by equipping students with the relevant metalanguage and terminologies (use of terms). It also exposes students to the use of grammar at word, phrase and sentence levels, with some exposure to different text types.

At secondary level, as this syllabus adopts a spiral and recursive approach, some of the terms are revisited, revised and expanded on as students study the linguistic features of different text types in detail. Teachers are encouraged to go through students' recurring grammar errors to better internalise the learning of grammar.

It is a fact that many students do not come from families that adopt standard English as the home language. Recognizing this, the syllabus prescribes the explicit teaching of grammar through meaningful contexts such as different text types, activities, tasks and topics. This is in contrast to the teaching of grammar in isolation and the implicit teaching of grammar.

Conclusion, Implications and Recommendations

In this concluding section, the focus is on gaps between student teachers' beliefs and the official discourse of the EL Syllabus 2010 as well as some pedagogical implications and recommendations.

On the reasons for teaching grammar, equipping students with grammar metalanguage is the least of the respondents' concerns. This view diverges from the recommendation of the syllabus in the "use of metalanguage for learning and talking about language structures and language in use" (p. 81).

With regard to the respondents' preferred approaches to grammar teaching, many of them are in favour of the implicit teaching of grammar in which teachers facilitate the discovery of rules by the students themselves. This is in contrast to the "systematic and explicit teaching instruction to build strong foundation in ... grammar" (p. 8) as categorically prescribed by the syllabus.

Although the majority realise the importance of possessing the metalanguage in teaching grammar, they concede that they do not possess adequate knowledge and hence, lack the confidence to teach the metalanguage. This will not stand them

in good stead, as the teaching of grammar metalanguage is an integral part of the syllabus: "...the role of grammar in the development of language skills and the use of metalanguage to talk about how language works are emphasised (in the syllabus)" (p. 8).

This study sets out to encourage student teachers to reflect and interrogate their beliefs about the teaching and learning of grammar and to uncover the underlying factors that inform their beliefs. In the process, it helps student teachers to notice and be more aware of their beliefs in this area which may otherwise go unnoticed. This is done by bringing to the conscious level what is hidden underneath the sub-conscious.

By bringing to light the gaps between student teachers' beliefs and the official discourse of the EL Syllabus 2010, this study attempts to help student teachers see the extent to which their beliefs about the teaching and learning of grammar are aligned to the strategies and methods prescribed by the EL Syllabus 2010. In this regard, this awareness raising exercise seeks to help student teachers to be more receptive to the explicit teaching and learning of grammar. This forms the first step in initiating a gradual shift in student teachers' mindset to be more aligned with the official discourse, as habitualised tendencies require time and effort to reconfigure.

As this is a preliminary study involving a small number of participants, future research can be replicated to include more participants to form generalisations that are applicable to the entire cohort of the programme.

Nevertheless, there are some areas that can be reviewed in response to the need to effect a change in student teachers' beliefs about the usefulness of metalanguage in the explicit teaching and learning of grammar in line with the EL Syllabus 2010. One particular area worth exploring is to extend this course to twelve face-to-face sessions over an entire semester. Currently, this course is conducted in five sessions during the first four to five weeks of the first semester. By extending the duration of the course, student teachers have more time to learn the metalanguage of grammar, to appreciate its relevance, to effect changes to their habitualised tendencies, and subsequently to see changes starting to take place. The extended semester-long course also helps to mitigate the stress that arises from the need to make adaptation and changes - from awareness to noticing and subsequently shifting in student teacher's mindset. This complements well another course titled *Language Teaching Approaches* with seventeen hours allocated for grammar teaching methodology. This course commences two or three weeks later than the grammar content

upgrading course in the same semester. Student teachers will then be able to better apply the metalanguage of grammar they learn in this content upgrading course to the grammar methodology section of the *Language Teaching Approaches* course with a minimal time lapse.

The current course structure and delivery can also be relooked to help student teachers better understand how the grammar metalanguage that they learn in the course can be applied in the teaching of different text types. The component of texts in context, although forming part of the current course structure, comes in the mode of a series of online lectures which student teachers are required to access after the five face-to-face sessions on grammar. By converting and integrating the texts in contexts component into face-to-face sessions, this will encourage meaningful class discussion and student participation. They will be in a better position to make the link between learning grammar metalanguage and its value in exploiting different text types in teaching grammar metalanguage.

Based on the proposed semester-long course structure, it would be instructive to conduct this survey at the beginning of the course to gauge student teachers' beliefs about the learning and teaching of grammar at the entry point. Subsequently, another similar survey towards the end of the course can be conducted to gauge their level of preparedness and confidence in teaching grammar metalanguage. By extension, a similar survey can be conducted at the end of their *Language Teaching Approaches* course. A comparison of the results of the surveys can provide insights into the extent to which student teachers have evaluated their beliefs.

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