

Exploring Teachers' Beliefs in Teaching Grammar

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' beliefs can play an important role in their decision-making regarding the type of materials, activities and instruction they will use in their lessons. At the same time, without conviction in their beliefs about how students learn, it is difficult to imagine teachers being effective in their teaching regardless of the approach they take. Most English language teachers have their own set of personal beliefs of grammar teaching and how grammar should be taught. The years of teaching experience a teacher has can easily shape such beliefs. This paper looks at teachers' beliefs using the data collected from a survey administered to 345 English language teachers in secondary schools in two states in Malaysia. A self-developed instrument modeled after Ellis (1998) was used in the study. The instrument looked at four aspects of grammar instruction in the classroom – input, explicit L2 knowledge, student output and error correction. The data were analyzed according to how teachers with varying years of teaching experience viewed the importance of each of these aspects of grammar instruction. The results indicated a number of interesting points which can help inform schools, teachers and other interested parties on how to plan for and present grammar in the classroom.

KEYWORDS: teacher education, beliefs, grammar instruction

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Introduction

The teaching of the English language subject in the Malaysian education system has always been the subject of scrutiny over the years as observed in Musa, Koo and Azman (2012), Koo (2008), Ting (2007), Hassan and Selamat (2002), Ratnavadivel (1999), Asraf (1996) and, Gaudart (1987), just to name a few. The current state of English language proficiency among students and school leavers from the Malaysian public school education system has never failed to stir up strong responses from concerned Malaysians. There are many aspects that may have influenced the decision making process of teachers who are teaching grammar in their English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. One of the key aspects is the ESL teachers' beliefs which have developed throughout their years of teaching the English language in the classroom.

Though ESL teachers are often scrutinized for their teaching approaches, more recently, researchers like Borg (1998) have noted that little attention was given to "second language (L2) teachers' perceptions of the role of grammar teaching in their work and to the manner in which instructional decisions regarding grammar teaching are informed by teachers' personal pedagogical systems" (p. 10). Teacher beliefs are important as emphasized by Richards and Lockhart (1994) who state that "what the teachers know and believe" as well as "teacher-knowledge and teacher-thinking" provide "the underlying framework or schemata which guides the teachers' classroom actions" (p. 29). A quick look at past studies in Malaysia has also shown the lack of studies conducted to find out the beliefs of ESL teachers pertaining to the teaching of grammar. Burgess and Etherington (2002) note the apparent situation of the teachers' individual context in their decision making as one of the major determiners for the kind of teaching that will take place. Therefore, it is important to study the aspect of the beliefs which influence teacher classroom decisions.

Researchers in ESL such as Ellis (1998) and Pajares (1992) have addressed the lack of research that explores the teachers' beliefs involving the process of decision-making in teaching grammar. Even though there may be other variables mentioned in this paper, the paper will only report on the finding of the study that explored ESL teachers' beliefs in teaching grammar in Malaysian secondary classrooms in relation to the teachers' years of teaching experience. The goal of this study is to take a closer look at their beliefs, as well as to explore the way beliefs influenced grammar teaching in their ESL classroom and focus on how they may differ among teachers with different years of teaching experience. Hence the two major questions examined in this study are:

1. Do teachers with different years of teaching experience express differences in beliefs in the teaching of grammar?
2. What beliefs regarding the teaching of grammar are favoured by teachers grouped according to their years of teaching experience?

The paper will also discuss, in general, the factors that influenced ESL teachers' beliefs and the implications of these findings for teacher education.

Background

Throughout the years, the attempts to study the beliefs of the in-service ESL teachers in Malaysia in grammar classroom instruction have been few. In 2006, Borg, discussed the lack of explicit discussion in the study of beliefs which he considers to be different from the study of related psychological constructs such as knowledge, conceptions and attitudes. The lack of studies in this

particular area in the Malaysian education system prevents educators and researchers alike from a good source of reference. As Richards (1998, pp. 51-52) acknowledges, “the teachers’ belief systems are stable sources of reference which are built gradually over the years they are teaching and are related to the teaching dimensions such as the teachers’ theory of language, the nature of language teaching, the role of the teacher, effective teaching practices and teacher-student relations.”

There are a number of factors that may shape teachers’ beliefs in their teaching. Eisentein-Ebsworth and Schweers (1997) claim that, when it comes to “articulating their rationales, teachers referred to various factors shaping their views, such as student wants, and syllabus expectations” (p. 255). Richards (1998) lists two different types of knowledge that may influence teachers’ understanding and practice of teaching. The first concerns the curricular goals, lesson plans, instructional activities, materials, tasks, and teaching techniques. The other relates to teachers’ personal and subjective philosophies and their understanding of what constitute good teaching. Other researchers such as Moini (2009) note that teachers’ social construct, which results from their personal experiences and influences from their work setting, play a role in the development of their beliefs.

Through his review on the extensive studies on beliefs, Borg (2003) insists that the studies on the practicing teachers “provide further support for the belief that prior learning experience shape teachers’ cognitions and instructional decisions” (p. 88). Other previous studies have also shown that teachers’ prior knowledge as learners with their previous ESL teachers plays an important role in shaping their current teaching beliefs of the teaching of grammar. For example, Nespor (1987) found that the teachers may be influenced by a “crucial experience or some particularly influential teacher produces a richly-detailed episodic memory which later serves the student as an inspiration and a template for his or her own teaching practices” (p. 320). Similarly, experience as learners has also been identified by Abdullah and Majid (2013) as one of the potential sources of beliefs, besides perceptions towards the students, institutional environment and practice and personal views on current practice in their study on Malaysian ESL teachers. These somewhat echo Ezzi’s (2012) statement on the complexity of the beliefs that teachers possess that “are likely to be derived from their prior experience of teaching English” (p. 170).

The importance of beliefs in influencing a teacher’s practice in the classroom cannot be ignored. Shavelson and Stern (1981) indicate that teachers’ action in the class is governed by their beliefs. The teachers’ beliefs of the teaching of grammar help them to “form part of the process of understanding how to conceptualize their work” (Richards, Gallo & Renandya, 2001, p. 42). These show the vitality of the role of ESL teachers’ beliefs’ in the process of making decisions involving the lesson contents, depth, the methodology used and other aspects of language teaching in their ESL grammar classroom.

The teachers’ effectiveness at delivering the grammar lessons may also be affected by their beliefs on how to teach grammar. Richards (1998) mentions that one of the two types of knowledge that can play an influential role in how effective the teacher will be in the classroom, is teachers’ personal view of teaching. Their beliefs are not formed loosely and do not just influence one aspect of the grammar teaching but also act as a filter for their instructional judgements and decision making in class and subsequently provide a “systematic justification process with which to plan, assess, judge, decide, accept, deny or act” (Ezzi, 2012, p. 172). This is the reason why it is crucial to conduct more studies in this area as it will provide valuable information that may be used to create a framework of sorts to help assist teachers in the teaching

of grammar as well as inform teacher trainers and administrators on how best to ensure that effective grammar teaching is constantly provided in the classroom.

Methodology

This study is a descriptive study using quantitative methods with data collected through a survey questionnaire. Although qualitative data were also collected through a structured focus group interview, this paper will only report on the quantitative portion of the study. The questionnaires of the survey were distributed by mail, over a 3 month period, from May 2013 until August 2013, to in-service ESL teachers in two states in peninsular Malaysia. The questionnaires were distributed by mail as not all schools have official email addresses and there was also no information available for teachers' personal email addresses. Calls were made to each school three weeks after the questionnaires were sent out to ensure that they were received by the schools and that teachers had responded.

Sample and population

Two states in peninsular Malaysia were randomly selected in the study and the survey questionnaire was sent to all 261 public secondary schools in the states. ESL teachers from these two states were then chosen as the sample. As there is no available information on the exact number of English teachers for each school, five questionnaires were sent to each school as it was anticipated that the schools would have at least five English teachers. Nevertheless, out of the 1305 survey forms sent out to all the schools, only 345 ESL teachers responded. The response rate of the survey was therefore relatively low at 26%. Although a higher response rate is always considered as better, Curtin, Presser and Singer (2000) found that, there are minimal differences in substantive answers in the comparison of lower response rate (i.e. 20 to 40 percent) with higher response rate at 60-70 percent. A number of questionnaires that were returned unanswered and a large number of unreturned questionnaires both contributed to the low response rate.

The 345 participants in this study consist of 70 male ESL teachers and 275 female ESL teachers. 161 of these participants have training in teaching English as second language (TESL) at the first degree level while the others have no such training. The majority of 184 participants are teaching in urban schools and the rest are in schools in the rural area.

As the teachers' teaching experience was an important variable in this study, teachers who responded were divided into varying groups according to this variable. Four groups were therefore formed based on the teachers' years of experience: Group 1 consisting of teachers with 7 or fewer years of experience, Group 2; 8 to 18 years of experience, Group 3; 19 to 29 years of experience, and Group 4; 30 and more years of experience. This decision was made based on the distribution of the number of years of experience the participants in the study had. The data analysis showed that there are 59 participants in experience group 1, 109 participants in experience group 2, 124 participants in experience group 3 and 53 participants in experience group 4.

Instrumentation

This study used a survey instrument that was developed to identify teacher beliefs and practice in relation to established theories in grammar instruction. The survey was constructed based on a computational model of second language acquisition proposed by Ellis (1998) that highlights four major stages in the learning process of the teaching of grammar. Each stage relates roughly to common beliefs on how grammar should be taught. The first stage, input, stresses on the

materials and the modification of input used in teaching grammar in the classroom. The second, explicit knowledge, provides explicit instruction; the third, output, emphasizes production practice; and the final stage, negative feedback, highlights the role of error correction. The model can be seen in Figure 1 with the four stages highlighted by the letters A, B, C, and D respectively.

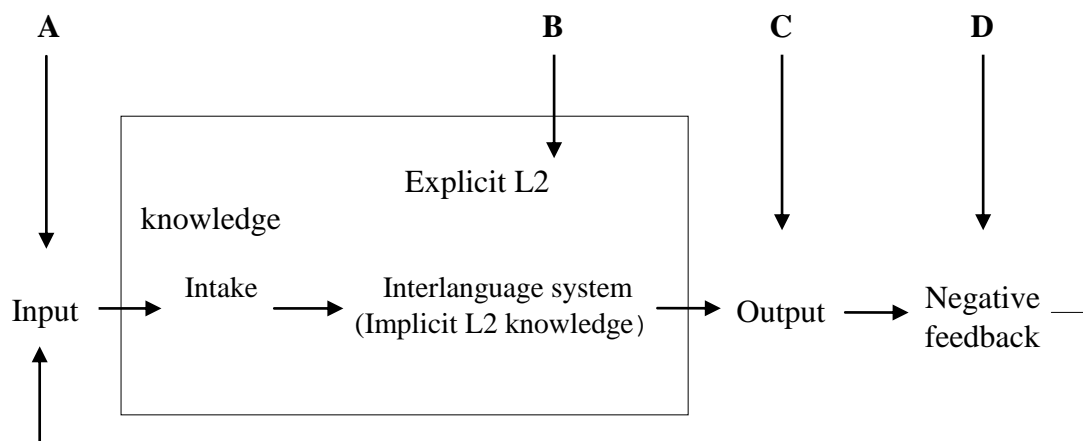


Figure 1. *A computational model of L2 acquisition (Ellis, 1998, p. 43)*

The survey instrument consisted of subjective items and 5 point Likert type items but for the purpose of this paper, the 28 Likert scale items were the most relevant. The Likert scale items rated the four main stages mentioned in Figure 1 as four separate categories. The items were developed according to the categories described earlier and also adapted from various studies on the teaching of grammar (Ezzi, 2012; Baleghizadeh & Farshchi, 2009; Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Peacock, 2001) with each of the four stages represented by seven items. Aggregate scores for the seven items for each stage were used to measure the respondents' view of the importance of each stage with higher values indicating higher importance. The questionnaire went through several stages of filtering including a thorough discussion of items according to the four stages and a pilot study to ensure respondents' comprehensibility of the instrument.

The data collected from the pilot study were analyzed for reliability using Cronbach-Alpha and the items with low reliability were excluded or clarified to be more specific to the need of the study. The modified version of the draft then went through another assessment by the committee which resulted in some minor changes to the items and the reduced number of the items to 28 items from the original 34 items.

Results

A One-Way ANOVA was used to analyze the difference between responses to the four stages of grammar teaching described in Figure 1 according to the variable of teaching experience for the four experience groups. Additionally, repeated measures ANOVA was also performed to examine the differences in the importance placed on these four stages within each group. The statistics of the responses of the teachers in the four experience groups towards the four stages of grammar teaching are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Teachers' beliefs towards the stages of grammar teaching

Experience Group	Stages of Grammar Teaching	Mean	Std. Deviation
Group 1 (N=54) 7 and less years of experience	Feedback	27.86	3.67
	L2knowledge	24.98	3.36
	Output	26.89	2.75
	Input	27.21	3.80
Group 2 (N=104) 8-18 years of experience	Feedback	28.17	3.52
	L2knowledge	26.45	9.22
	Output	26.58	2.66
	Input	26.06	3.17
Group 3 (N=111) 19-29 years of experience	Feedback	28.64	3.72
	L2knowledge	24.91	3.26
	Output	26.55	2.67
	Input	26.07	2.97
Group 4 (N=48) 30 and more years of experience	Feedback	28.84	3.73
	L2knowledge	25.38	2.87
	Output	26.47	2.87
	Input	26.42	3.43

In the one way ANOVA, the study found that there is no significant difference in the teachers' beliefs according to their years of experience. More specifically, there was no difference between the four groups in terms of their beliefs regarding input ($F=2.55$, $p>.05$), explicit knowledge ($F=1.56$, $p>.05$), output ($F=0.27$, $p>.05$) and feedback ($F=0.981$, $p>.05$). Despite not having any significant difference between the four experience groups, it should be noted that the mean plots indicate a strong pattern in the beliefs of the teachers regarding the four types of belief categories according to years of teaching experience. This is especially true in their beliefs regarding feedback and output. The mean plots for these two beliefs are presented in Figures 2 and 3 below.

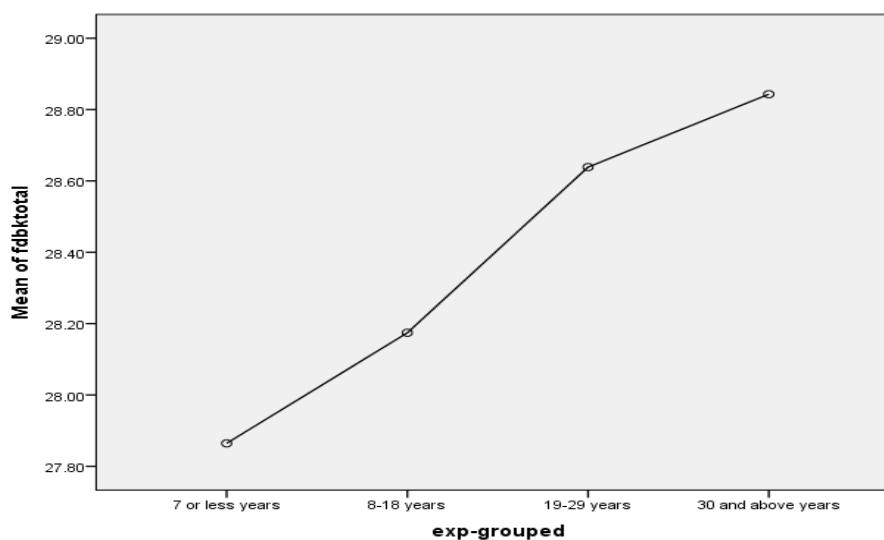


Figure 2. Mean plot of the importance of feedback according to the respondents' years of teaching experience

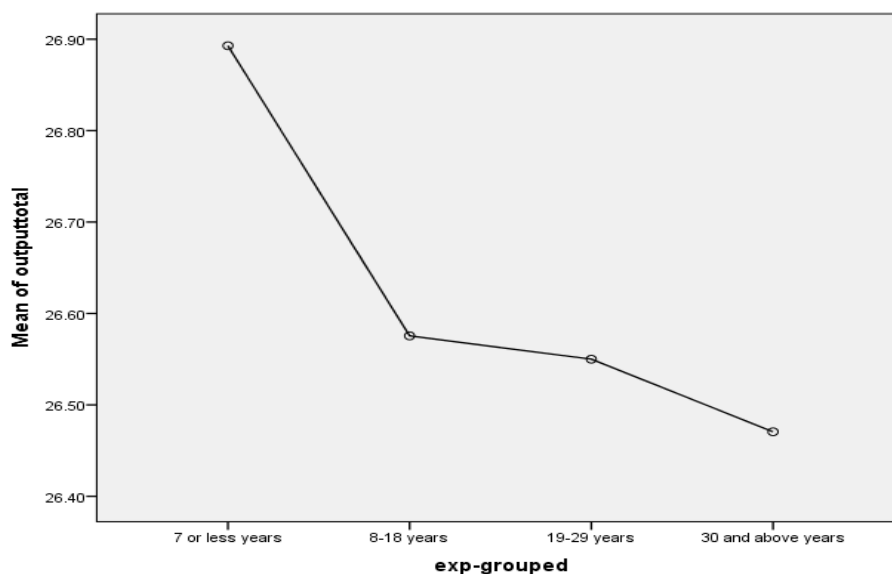


Figure 3. Mean plot of the importance of student output according to the respondents' years of teaching experience

As can be seen in Figure 2, belief in the importance of providing feedback increases with experience. Figure 3, on the other hand, shows that teachers with less years of experience consider students output practice important and this decreases as teaching experience increases.

The repeated measures ANOVA yielded significant differences for two of the four groups of teachers, i.e. teachers with seven or less years of experience as well as for those with 30 or more years of experience. The less experienced teachers felt that explicit L2 knowledge of grammatical rules was the least important of the four beliefs. The repeated measures ANOVA showed that explicit knowledge of L2 grammatical rules was considered significantly less important ($p < .05$) to feedback, output as well as input with pairwise comparisons of 2.83, -1.65 and -2.35 respectively. For the more experienced group, their beliefs towards the importance of

feedback were significantly higher than their beliefs towards students' language output. Pairwise comparison reveals the mean difference to be 3.27 and 2.31 respectively with $p < .05$.

Discussion and conclusion

This study has shown some interesting results in terms of teachers' beliefs towards the teaching of grammar based on their years of teaching experience. The teachers from Group 1 (teachers with fewer than 7 years of teaching experience) do not seem to believe that it is as important to provide feedback to the students compared to the other kinds of emphasis in teaching grammar. This may be caused by their training that focused more on communication, which may consequently lead them to believe that by giving feedback to students all the time, it will disrupt students' natural flow of communication. It may also be the case that younger teachers keep more strictly to their teaching plan, as pointed out by Mackey, Polio and McDonough (2004) who found that less experienced teachers "may be less likely to deviate from their planned lessons to exploit spontaneous learning opportunities" (p. 307). Another reason might be that the teachers from Group 1 do not have enough knowledge or confidence to give grammar related feedback, therefore they de-emphasize the importance of feedback in grammar instruction in their classroom.

The results from the mean plot regarding the output (Figure 3) also seem to support the teaching approach adopted by less experienced teachers as with more feedback provided by the teachers, there will be less time for the students' output. Teachers from Group 1 provide less feedback but allow for more student production or output. As teachers gain more experience, this trend reverses and more feedback is provided and less student output seems to take place in the classroom. While this observation is cross-sectional, it will be interesting to examine whether this pattern will continue in the years to come as the less experienced teachers in this study gain more experience.

A second interesting result of this study is how the less experienced teachers from Group 1 believe explicit L2 knowledge to be the least important of the four categories in teaching grammar. This result may cause concern for many stakeholders as it can indicate that the more recently graduated teachers do not have enough content knowledge to handle the teaching of grammar. These teachers therefore, focus on student production, preparation of input materials and to a lesser extent, feedback, instead of explicit L2 grammatical knowledge. However, whether this situation is due to teacher training that emphasizes communication over grammatical knowledge or whether it is because of the recently graduated teachers' own lack of abilities remains to be seen.

This study clearly shows that the years of teaching experience can have an influence on a teacher's beliefs regarding the teaching of grammar. Teacher educators and other stakeholders in education must therefore pay greater attention to continuous professional development and training in order to ensure that teachers continue to hold correct and appropriate beliefs in the teaching of grammar and consequently teach grammar in their classes accordingly. This suggestion is no different from that suggested by Ezzi (2012) that teachers should be "regularly provided with feedback on their teaching behavior" to improve the quality of their teaching (p. 180). However, it is important to also note that the low rate of response of the participants in this study may impose some limitations on the ability to generalise the findings. Future studies that plan on using mail surveys should also consider following up with the selected schools using a reminder letter or resending a second or third mailing of questionnaires to increase the rate of response of the survey.

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