

PEDAGOGICAL GRAMMAR: ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS and ACTUATIONS

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Abstract:

The study was conducted to determine the beliefs and practices of the English Language Teachers (ELT) in the teaching of grammar in one state university in Northwestern Cagayan, Philippines. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was adopted. Descriptive statistics and coding were used to analyze and interpret the data. The language teachers had a variety of complex beliefs about grammar teaching, and the core belief focuses on the necessity of grammar instruction to be taught to learners explicitly and implicitly. They strongly believe that integrating games into grammar instruction can facilitate students' learning; that drills, exercises, and assignments are appropriate teaching activities, and that the introduction of activities that create for students to participate in group/pairs can facilitate language learning. These teachers discuss errors in grammar class. Also, they employ drills, exercises, assignments as well as speaking and writing activities during and after the discussion of a grammar topic. Their choice of activities in a grammar class depends on the students' interest, the level of the students, and the availability of materials. Findings also show the inconsistencies in the stated beliefs, self-reported practices and in the actual observed practices of these English language teachers.

Key Words: *classroom practices , English language, grammar teaching, teachers' beliefs*

Introduction

Over the years, language teachers have alternated between favoring teaching approaches that focus primarily on language use and those that focus on language forms or analysis. This is due to a fundamental disagreement concerning whether one learns to communicate in a second language by communicating in that language or by learning the lexicogrammar-the words and grammatical structure of the target language (Murcia & Freeman, 2008). In other words, the matter as to whether to teach or not to teach grammar in English classrooms is not easily resolved for there are evidences to support both points of view.

Grammar is central to the teaching and learning of a language. It is one of the most important aspects of language by which learners expect to communicate well (Baleghizadeh & Farshhi, 2009). Wu (2007) cited in Ahmadi & Shafiee (2015) noted that grammar is the main part of L2 instruction as it improves learners' writing, reading and listening skills altogether. Deng & Lin (2016) regard grammar as a frame of English learning. Pekka (2015) made an analogy that if language would be a tree, grammar would be its trunk and branches, and words are the leaves. In other words, the whole base for language teaching is grammar for it is the foundation.

However, grammar instruction is viewed as one of the most difficult issues of language teaching (Mart, 2013). People think grammar as a fixed set of word forms and rules of usage. They associate "good" grammar with the prestige forms of the language, such as those used in formal oral and written presentations, and "bad" grammar with the language used in everyday conversation by speakers of non prestige forms (Byrd, 1998). Some language teachers teach grammar directly. Others tend not to teach grammar at all, believing that children acquire their first language without explicit grammar instruction. They assume that students will absorb grammar rules as they hear, read, and use the language in communication activities.

In the Philippine classrooms, the controversy on whether to teach or not to teach grammar and how to teach it to L2 learners also exist. While it is believed that English language plays a cardinal role in every Filipino learner, and a tool for learning and communication, it is a sad thing to note, however, that the linguistic competence has deteriorated among students. Recently, Senator Grace Poe filed a resolution inquiring the decline of English proficiency of Filipino students (Leonen, 2018). Also, according to Andrew King, International Development Program (IDP) Education's country director for the Philippines, the standard of English in the Philippines, a country which prides itself on its English proficiency, is declining and the quality of teachers is one factor identified that have contributed to this fall (Wilson, 2009).

With this, the end-goal of teaching English in the country - linguistic and communicative competence, is far from realization. By communicative competence, we mean the ability of the individual to listen, speak, read and write with a considerable degree of fluency, accuracy, appropriateness and acceptability. It is the tacit knowledge and ability to use the language effectively (Nordquist, 2018). Linguistic or grammatical competence, on the other hand, is the tool by which communicative competence is attained. It is the unconscious knowledge of grammar that allows a speaker to use and understand a language (Nordquist, 2017).

There has been a growing realization on the need to understand the beliefs and classroom practices of language teachers in the teaching of grammar for teachers play a great role in the development of those competencies (Mohammed, 2006). Gilakjani & Sabouri (2017) noted that teachers' beliefs have a great effect in forming active teaching methods and bring about a considerable amount of advance in learners' language capabilities.

Seemingly, however, the beliefs and practices in grammar teaching of the language teachers of the Cagayan State University at Sanchez Mira (CSU-SM) have not yet been assessed. This prompted the researcher to conduct the study to have a descriptive account on what grammar teachers believe, do, and how they do, and provide basis for teacher and student development in this field.

Objectives of the Study

Generally, this study determined the beliefs and practices of the English language teachers in grammar teaching. Specifically, it sought answers on the profile of the respondents as regards age, sex, ethnicity, highest educational attainment, academic rank and length of language teaching in the university. It also looked into the language teachers' beliefs and core

belief about grammar teaching. Likewise, it determined their classroom practices in teaching grammar and the factors that influence their choice of grammar activities. Finally, it explored on their beliefs and self-reported practices that were not observed in the actual grammar classes.

Methodology

The study combined quantitative and qualitative methods of research as it aimed to describe systematically, factually and accurately the language teachers' beliefs in grammar teaching and the practices in English grammar classrooms through questionnaire-based survey, interview and non-participatory class observation.

The questionnaire-based survey was used to obtain information from the participants on the personal profile, their grammar teaching beliefs, their classroom practices in grammar teaching, and the factors that influence the teacher's choice of activities in grammar class. Class observation and interview were the means of understanding the beliefs that underlie their practices.

The respondents for the teachers' beliefs questionnaire survey consisted of all the English language teachers of the said university. For the qualitative part, purposive sampling was used to identify the grammar teachers within the population that met the criteria set: one who had answered all the items in the questionnaire; who presently holds at least two grammar classes; and who is willing to be interviewed and to be observed in his/her grammar classes.

The study utilized the following sources of data: Questionnaire, Structured open-ended interview, Classroom observation, and Document data (syllabi, activity sheets, books and lecture notes). After floating and retrieving sets of survey questionnaires, and conducting the class observation and interview, the data were collated, tabulated and analyzed.

The profile of the respondents, their beliefs and practices regarding grammar teaching, and the factors that affect their choice of grammar activities were analyzed and interpreted by frequencies, percentages and mean. The data on class observations and their responses to the interview were transcribed and read several times to get the main ideas being expressed. They were then coded and analyzed.

Findings

Profile of the English Language Teachers

As to age, majority of the English Language Teachers in the study, 37.5% are 21-30 years old. There is however 25% each who are within the age brackets 31-40 and 41-50; and 12.5% for the age bracket 51-60. The mean age of 36.75 means that the English language teachers in the study are in their early adulthood, and they are in the mid- years of their teaching career.

Male respondents constitute 31.25% of the population, and females, 68.75%. This finding supports that more females, who are more inclined into language, pursued teacher education major in English.

Almost all of the English language teacher-respondents are Ilocano (native language) which constitutes 87.5% of the total population. The remaining percentage constitutes the Itawes and Ibanag English language teachers. This could be due to the fact that CSU-SM which is at the Northwestern part of Cagayan is predominantly an Ilocano speaking community.

Regarding the highest educational attainment of the teachers, 37.5% have already finished Doctorate degree. About 43.75% have already earned their Master's degree and 18.75% of the total population are graduates of their Bachelor's degree. This means that Master's degree (MA/MS) being the minimum qualification of teaching in a university was met by majority.

As regards their academic rank, 62.5% of the respondents are Part-time Instructors. The remaining percentage are regular faculty occupying Associate Professor, Assistant Professor and Instructor with 12.5%, 18.75 and 6.25% respectively. This shows that for every ten respondents, six language teachers in the university were not given permanent positions. Also, since these respondents occupy low positions, the English language teachers do not receive that much.

As to the length of language teaching in the university, majority, 62.5% of them have been teaching for 5 years and below. About 18.75% have taught for 6-10 years, 6.25% for 11-15 years, and 12.5% for more than 20 years. The mean number of years in teaching which is 6.88 could mean that they have established their niche in the university.

Teachers' Beliefs in the Teaching of Grammar

Table 1 presents the summary on the beliefs of English language teachers along these categories: importance of grammar, approaches in grammar teaching, students' way and ability to learn grammar and error- correction strategies in grammar teaching.

The respondents have a Strong Agreement on the belief to integrate games into grammar instruction for it facilitates students' learning. This is supported by Macrory (2000) cited in Deng and Lin (2016) whose respondents believed the need for more games in grammar teaching to arouse students' interest. Also, the teachers had a strong agreement on the use of drills, exercises, assignments and group activities as appropriate activities that facilitate learning. Also, the use of multiple assessment, and discussion of grammar rules in standard written and oral English are strongly agreed beliefs by the teachers.

Moreover, they strongly Agree on the beliefs that students can learn grammar best through a mix of clear explanation and practice, that if they receive grammar instruction, they are more likely to correct their errors", and that regular and repetitive grammar practice is essential for language mastery. These beliefs are supported by Farrell (2005) who found in his one case study saying that explicit teaching of grammar rules and sentence structures, and the utilization of drills are beneficial for learners.

Likewise, the teachers strongly agree on the importance of using multimedia equipment in teaching grammar, that students are encouraged to analyze language and discover rules, that peer editing should be encouraged, and permission to students to make errors without teachers' correction means difficulty in the correction later on.

These strongly agreed beliefs imply that the English language teachers provide opportunities or adequate and varied activities for the students to practice and use the language. Teachers' beliefs represent a combination of both the traditional and communicative approaches to grammar teaching. Wach (2013) supports the findings where the participants in her study had a balanced belief of traditional, explicit teaching and communication-oriented teaching. On the other hand, Anderson (2005) cited in Mart (2013) stressed that teaching grammar be taught in context for it provides a meaningful framework that connects to reality in the targeted language.

Meanwhile, the teachers "Agree" that accuracy is more important than fluency, identifying and correcting all student errors is important, students are encouraged to self-correct their errors in grammar, students pick up ungrammatical language from each other so rectify their errors right away", and paper and pencil test should still be used in grammar classroom. These findings support the common practice of some language teachers in immediately correcting the errors they encounter in speaking and writing, for they value accuracy. Their agreement on the beliefs regarding the importance of error correction through self or peer correction is supported by Ahmadee & Shafiee (2015).

Somehow, the language teachers are "Uncertain" in the beliefs that a learner acquires grammatical competence even without grammar instruction, grammar is best acquired unconsciously through meaningful communication, and grammar can be successfully taught even without extensive use of grammatical terminology. Their uncertainty could mean that teachers are not so sure of theories that support their teaching of grammar.

"Strong Disagreement" is marked among the teachers in the belief that grammar instruction is not essential. Ezzi (2012) supports the findings that students cannot acquire English without grammar instruction. The teachers "Disagree" that students do not need to memorize the rules they learn in grammar class". This implies the need for the teachers to still teach the rudiments of grammar and let students memorize the rules. As Mart (2013) puts grammar is rules of a language, so the rules in grammar should not be ignored. Wach (2013) also found in her study that the respondents have an inclination toward traditional structure-based options in teaching and learning, and providing clear rules by the teacher and rote learning is effective.

It is also noted that the teachers disagree that ignoring students' errors in grammar is all right-fluency vs accuracy. Their disagreement means the necessity to correct students' errors as they arise. Also, they disagree that mother tongue should be used to teach grammar concepts.

As a whole the language teachers of Cagayan State University-Sanchez Mira have the common beliefs that grammar teaching is inclined to a combination of traditional and collaborative or communicative approaches as shown by the overall weighted mean of 3.93 which means they "AGREE" or subscribe to the beliefs given which are generally positive.

Table: 1
Summary of Teachers' Beliefs in the Teaching of Grammar

Grammar Teaching Beliefs	Weighted Mean	Descriptive Value
To integrate games in grammar instructions can facilitate students' learning	4.84	Strongly Agree
Drills, exercises and assignments are appropriate teaching activities.	4.78	Strongly Agree
To introduce activities that create for students to participate in group/pairs can facilitate language mastery.	4.75	Strongly Agree
Students can learn grammar better if they fully understand the rules in standard written and oral English.	4.66	Strongly Agree
Multiple assessments should be implemented to evaluate students' grammatical performance in the classroom.	4.66	Strongly Agree
Students can learn grammar best through a mix of clear explanation and practice.	4.56	Strongly Agree
Regular and repetitive grammar practice is essential for language mastery.	4.53	Strongly Agree
If learners receive grammar instruction, they are more likely to be able to correct their errors.	4.53	Strongly Agree
The use of multi- media equipment is important in teaching grammar.	4.41	Strongly Agree
Students are encouraged to analyze language and discover rules	4.41	Strongly Agree
If learners are permitted to make errors in grammar without teachers' correction, it will be more difficult to correct them later on.	4.38	Strongly Agree
Grammar should be taught integratively rather than taught separately.	4.38	Strongly Agree
Peer editing should be encouraged.	4.25	Strongly Agree
It is important to identify and correct all students' errors.	4.16	Agree
Students are encouraged to self correct their errors	4.16	Agree
Paper and pencil test should still be used in the grammar classroom.	3.97	Agree
Students pick up ungrammatical language from each other, so rectify their errors right away.	3.84	Agree
Accuracy is more important than fluency.	3.69	Agree
Grammar can be successfully taught without extensive use of grammatical terminology	2.94	Uncertain
Grammar is best acquired by students unconsciously through meaningful communication.	2.75	Uncertain
A learner can acquire grammatical competence even without grammar instruction.	2.69	Uncertain
Students do not need to memorize the rules they learn in grammas class	(2.48)	Disagree
When students make errors, it is best to ignore them, as long as you can understand what they are trying to say.	(2.38)	Disagree
Mother tongue should be used to teach grammar	2.34	Disagree
Grammar instruction is not essential. It should not be taught to learners	(1.53)	Strongly Disagree
Total Weighted Mean	3.93	Agree

Classroom Practices in Grammar Teaching

As seen from the table 2 below, “Discussion of errors with class” leads the list of frequently used activities in a grammar class reported by the language teachers. It is followed by “Communicative grammar tasks”, and “Explanation of grammar point/rules”. On the other hand, the occasionally used activities include “Oral pattern-practice drills”, “Comprehension-based grammar tasks”, “Comparison with mother tongue grammar”, “Written grammar exercises”, and “Translation of grammar rules to vernacular”.

This could mean to language teachers that in their grammar classes, activities that develop students’ communication skills in error free language is of importance. Communicative oral activities are prioritized over paper and pen grammar activities.

The emphasis on discussion of error as practiced by the language teachers is supported by Musafa (2012) and Long (2007) cited in Almuhammedi & Alshumaimeri (2015) who confirmed that correction of grammatical errors help students in language learning and the teacher plays a key role in correcting grammatical errors. Also, they found out that error correction through explicit and implicit technique combinations is of great significance in increasing students’ understanding of their linguistic limitations.

The respondents’ reported practice on teaching grammar through communicative tasks is supported by Wach (2013) and Deng & Lin (2016) who noted in their studies that the teacher-respondents have an appreciation of communicative , context-based grammar teaching. Their practice of explaining grammar points/rules is also supported by Graus & Coppen (2015) who found out that the respondents prefer explicit, form-focused and inductive instruction of teaching grammar. Also, Farrell (2005) found that the teachers studied were mainly traditional teacher-centered, explaining the grammar lesson and providing feedback on learners’ error in grammar. Uysal & Bardakci (2014) support the findings in which the teachers surveyed predominantly prefer the traditional focus-on-forms approach where there is explicit grammar instruction, mechanical drills, use of first language translations in teaching grammar.

Table: 2
Classroom Practices in Grammar Teaching

Grammar Teaching Practices	Weighted Mean	Descriptive Value
Discussion of errors with class	4.25	Frequently Used
Communicative grammar tasks	4.12	Frequently Used
Explanation of grammar point/rules	3.80	Frequently Used
Oral pattern-practice drills	3.30	Occasionally Used
Comprehension –based grammar tasks	3.25	Occasionally Used
Comparison with mother tongue grammar	3.05	Occasionally Used
Written grammar exercises	2.94	Occasionally Used
Translation of rules to vernacular	2.70	Occasionally Used

Factors that Influence the Teachers’ Choice of Activities in a Grammar Class

Based on the results, the language teachers appear to be strongly influenced by their own students as "the interest of the students" seems to be the most influential factor behind the teachers' choice of activities in a grammar class. It is also interesting to note that "the level of students" and "the availability of materials", were also essential in their choice of activities in classroom grammar instruction.

On the other hand, the factors "what I learned from the teacher training", "current research in the field", "what I think it will work", "the schools' goals and policies" and the indicator "my personal goals and beliefs" are factors that seemed to be very important to them in choosing a grammar activity. The factors "what feels right at the moment" and "the way my peers operate" were found to be important factor that influence the activities employed by the teachers in a grammar class.

This means that the learners, being the center of the educative process is of utmost consideration in the teachers' decisions. Ahmadi & Shafiee (2015) supports the findings who noted that using student-centered activities provide a chance for learners to express themselves and enjoy learning.

Table: 3

Factors that Influence the Teachers' Choice of Activities in a Grammar Class

Factors	Weighted Mean	Descriptive Values
The interest of my students	4.53	Essential
The level of my students.	4.34	Essential
The availability of materials	4.31	Essential
What I learned from the teacher training	4.00	Very Important
What I think it will work	3.84	Very Important
Current research in the field	3.75	Very Important
My school's goals and policies	3.59	Very Important
My personal goals and beliefs	3.59	Very Important
What feels right at the moment	2.97	Important
The way my peers operate	2.69	Important
Total Weighted Mean	3.76	Very Important

Teachers' Core Beliefs about Grammar Teaching

It was clear from the teachers' responses to the questionnaire and interviews that their pedagogical beliefs were seen to influence other less strongly held beliefs. One strong core belief that most teachers shared centered on the importance of grammar teaching and the related issues of how grammar should be taught. The language teachers discussed the importance of grammar for communication, comprehension and clear expression. Almost two thirds of the total population shared that grammar instruction is necessary and be taught to learners through a combination of traditional and modern approaches. This findings share the study of Ahmadi &

Shafiee (2015) who found out that the teachers had strong beliefs about the importance of grammar language institutes. The reason might be that grammar has been conceived as one of the most important concepts in human communication by which people express their thoughts and ideas they want to share.

Grammar was regarded by the teachers as a declarative set of facts to be learnt and grammar instruction was seen to entail the explanation of grammar rules of English language learning. Some of the respondents noted that “Grammar is an essential tool for communication. Hence, grammar should be taught in meaningful context specifically communicative for functional and practical use.” A few respondents also added that “Teaching is best done through communicative approach where language is taught through authentic experiences and materials. This could be because they were overly concerned about students’ communicative language ability. This findings support the view of Mart (2013) who concluded that teaching grammar through context will help learners perceive the structures of the language effectively. Learners according to him will use grammatical conventions more effectively in communication if they learn them in context. Also, Riddell (2003) believed that when students are exposed to the target language in an authentic or near authentic setting, they see or hear the target language before having to focus on it.

Inconsistent Beliefs and Actual Observed Practice

Although there were some degrees of congruence between teachers’ stated beliefs and the observed classroom practices, several conflicts between teachers’ beliefs and their actual practice were identified, confirming Parajes’ (1992) view that stated beliefs are an unreliable indicator of actual practice.

The language teachers strongly believe that if learners receive grammar instruction, the students are more likely to be able to self-correct their errors. In the actual observed practice, despite the explicit grammar instruction to students, these learners could hardly identify and self-correct their errors in grammar. Most of the times, the language teachers do the correction. The document data drills in the notebook and checked papers would affirm to this.

Furthermore, teachers’ preferred learner-centred activities such as Communicative Language Teaching and Task Based Language Teaching were believed to be more effective than one that was dominated by the teacher. However, their unfamiliarity with such approaches may have led them to teach differently. The issue of maintaining discipline was a central theme that was evidenced in the data. A teacher-dominant approach would help to minimize student talk, and therefore make it easier to maintain discipline.

The teachers reported in their beliefs that the integration of grammar games and cooperative learning activities can facilitate language mastery. But, in the observations, seldom did the researcher witness these grammar teachers employ these activities because of time constraint.

Drills and memorization techniques are believed to be traditional ways to teach grammar. Yet, language teachers were observed writing rules on the board, scribbling the how’s of the

topic at hand. They provided rules and illustrative examples for students to analyze and memorize. The language teachers generally disagree on the use of the mother tongue in grammar teaching. But they were observed teaching in the native language explaining that “sometimes we have to act against our beliefs if we know that an action is going to benefit in some way majority of the students.”

Language teachers must not create a stressful environment for learning grammar; instead he makes grammar teaching and learning grammar fun. But, daily assignments, practice exercises, drills on the target structure and frequent writing activities, which in nature are stressors to students, were the given activities to students to achieve accuracy.

Inconsistent Self-reported Practices and Actual Observed Practice

The survey questionnaire and interview revealed that “Written grammar exercise” is an occasionally used activity in their grammar classes. This is in contrast with the observed practice, for most of the times, a written drill and exercises in a notebook, activity sheets, and on the board were given by the language teachers.

“Discussion of Errors” was the most frequently used grammar-based activity. Language teachers took “Discussion of Errors” to mean “error correction” because actual observation revealed that although errors were frequently identified and corrected both orally and in writing, these errors were not usually discussed, either with the individual student making the error, or with the whole class. Teachers appeared to be concerned more with the correction of errors rather than engaging in any form of discussion or clarification relating to the errors made. Integration of grammar games in grammar instruction ranked first among the other grammar activities that language teachers claim to employ in their classroom teaching, but rarely did the researcher observe the teachers surveyed employing that activity. A young teacher in the field expressed the desire to conduct grammar games but appeared to lack the expertise and the confidence to actually carry these out, fearing classroom management problems, and time constraint.

One possible explanation for such contradictory beliefs and practice may be related to what Shultz (2001) cited in Mohammed (2006), described as the “perturbing differences” regarding how second language is learned. As Farrell (2005) notes, when teachers who have learned the language through traditional methods undergo teacher training which calls for a more modern approach to teaching, there can be a mismatch between their prior understandings and knowledge gained from the training. The findings on inconsistent beliefs and actual classroom practices were the same results found by Ezzi (2012) among Yemeni teachers. This is also congruent with the findings of Richards, Gallo, and Renandya’ survey, (2001) and Farrel and Lim (2005) as cited in Ezzi (2012).

Conclusion

Cagayan State University- Sanchez Mira language teachers possess a variety of beliefs about the teaching of grammar. It centers on the necessity of direct or indirect grammar instruction to learners. Grammar teaching which is based on the learners' interest and level is done through a mixture of communicative, collaborative, context-based and traditional grammar approaches and activities. Non-participatory classroom observations have shown that teachers' beliefs and self-reported practices are not reliable measures of actual practice.

Suggestions and Recommendations

1. English language teachers are encouraged to reflect on and examine their own beliefs and practices along grammar teaching. They have to put into action these beliefs for the better learning of diverse students.

2. Grammar teachers have to continuously adopt both communicative-collaborative and traditional approaches in the teaching of grammar to meet the needs of various learners.

3. The government and the academe must support teacher development- permanent positions, promotions in rank, and training along language/grammar teaching.

4. A follow up study is to be conducted to include the grammar learning beliefs of the learners to harmonize the gap, thus maximizing the grammar teaching effects.

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