

Grammar Beliefs of in-Service Teachers

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Abstract

This research aims at understanding the mental lives of non-native English language teachers at the tertiary level. It aims to view teachers' beliefs regarding meaning of grammar, and grammar instruction. The research was done on two colleges at Yanbu Industrial City. The research is a quantitative one with a cross-sectional design. I used a self-completion questionnaire to collect data with a Likert scale. Data were analyzed using the SPSS software. Teachers gave great importance to grammar as the significance of the results suggest. Teachers believe that form and meaning should be taught together; and it should be put in a meaningful context. The Form-Focused Instruction seems as an appropriate teaching method that suits teachers' beliefs. Research in the field of teacher cognition helps developing more effective training sessions for teachers, and more effective syllabi and courses.

Keywords: teacher cognition, teacher beliefs, teachers' grammar cognition, Form-Focused Instruction

1. Introduction:

When a teacher says that he or she adopts a communicative approach, does that really mean that the teacher appreciates its details? Teachers are humans, and accepting that means that teachers have their own perception of the world as others. So having their own perceptions, means applying methods will be influenced by what they think and do. Such field is of value due to its direct impact on learning. Such influence came from its focus on the ones responsible of teaching--the teachers. This field of teacher cognition allows us to discover those implicit beliefs teachers have about learning and language teaching. By discovering those beliefs, we will be able to interpret teachers' behaviors more effectively. Those behaviors are the actual classroom practices accomplished by teachers.

2. Significance of the study:

Significance of research in the field of teacher cognition can be viewed from different perspectives. One of them is the context of the research. In Saudi Arabia little research (if non) had been done in this particular field. No researcher (to my knowledge) had tried to investigate the English language teachers' teaching beliefs, nor grammatical beliefs, in Saudi. Moreover, language institutions nowadays are claiming to teach using various 'new' 'effective' methodologies said to have the communicative aspects, while they did not monitor the actual classroom practice. Such proclaims will be worthless, if the teachers did not believe in those methodologies. Also, doing research in this area will help in developing training courses for teachers. Training, then, will serve the actual needs of teachers. It will shed light on the weaknesses that are 'declared' by the teachers themselves. And because we are living in an era that is cutting costs, we will not design courses that will not have a positive impact on teachers' practices.

3.1 Introduction: Teacher Cognition

One of the figures in the field of teacher cognition is Simon Borg who defined teacher cognition as "the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching-- what teachers know, believe, and think" (Borg, 2003, P.81). This field, then, will give us the advantage of seeing language instruction in a more humanized manner; through the eyes of the teachers. For instance, a traditional and a common believe between language learners is that to know a language is to know and master its grammar. Well, this is the learners' perception of language which can be generalized even to teachers. In studies done by Chia (2003), Burgess and Etherington (2002), they found that teachers tended to teach grammar in a formal, deductive way. In a study done by Brumfit, Mitchell, and Hooper (1996), they found that foreign language teachers tend to understand grammar as explicit rules at the superficial level. Such findings suggest that the latest methodologies of second/foreign language teaching have little impact on teachers and that there are factors contributing to that. One of those factors is that teachers apply what they had been taught by, as been proposed by Clark and Peterson (1986).

3.2 Purpose of the paper:

The purpose of my research is to uncover those beliefs teachers have in relation to language instruction, and particularly grammar instruction. I shall try to explore teachers' beliefs regarding meaning of grammar, grammar instruction, importance of grammar learning, importance of correcting students' errors, and gender differences between male and female in-service teachers, if any. This research will help understand the mental lives of in-service teachers. Further, it will support the form-focused instruction approach in foreign-language classes.

4.1 Previous Research: Defining the construct ‘belief’:

Before starting to define teacher beliefs and teacher cognition, first I should reflect on the term ‘belief’ as it is seen in the philosophy literature. Belief had been viewed by contemporary philosophers as related to the attitude we show when we regard something as true; thus, belief is a state of mind. But states of mind do not exist or are, at least, cannot be known as the behaviorists claim. Therefore, behaviorists do not use the term ‘belief’ in their literature; and if it is used, they use it in a rather different sense. So, because this paper is not interested in being part of the problematic question of what is belief, I will refer to it as most contemporary philosophers see it as a ‘propositional attitude’. A proposition is whatever a sentence express in respect to the language used. Therefore, a propositional attitude is the opinion we have about what a sentence truly expresses.

4.2 Defining teacher cognition:

Borg (2003, P.81) had defined teacher cognition as “ the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching--what teachers know, believe, and think.” The way teachers think effect their daily practice of teaching. The beliefs deeply rooted in the teachers minds will affect, for sure, the way they approach language and teaching. Hampton (1994), sees that teachers’ beliefs ‘determine how they approach their teaching.’ Due to such reasons, studying teachers’ beliefs has been an important research interest in the field English language teaching.

The National Institute of Education had realized in 1975 the importance of such area of research in which they stated the following:

it is obvious that what teachers do is directed in no small measure by what they think....To the extent that observed or intended teaching behavior is "thoughtless", it makes no use of the human teacher's most unique attributes. In so doing, it becomes mechanical and might well be done by a machine. If, however, teaching is done and, in all likelihood, will continue to be done by human teachers, the question of relationships between thought and action becomes crucial. (p.1)

Such report from this institution, made a great shift to the views of teaching and teachers in which the emphasis had been shed on cognitive processing. Therefore, teaching had not been seen as only a set of behaviors, but included the ‘thoughtful behavior’ as Borg (2009) claimed.

In the field of teacher cognition, the construct teacher’s belief, and teacher’s cognition had know agreeable definition. According to Pajares (1992), an overuse of synonyms were seen in the literature. In Borg’s (2006) book, he surveyed a number of those different definitions. Phrases like conception of teaching, general pedagogical knowledge, implicit theories, knowing-in-action, lay theories, orientations of teaching, personal practical knowledge, personalized pedagogy, practical theories , professional craft knowledge, situated knowledge, and teaching criteria, were used to refer to those beliefs teachers have in mind, and their realizations of them in the classroom.

4.3 Research in Teacher Cognition:

Before the 1970s, research in the area of teacher cognition was influenced by Behaviorism. Research in the effectiveness of teaching was measured through the correlation of students’ performance. The orientation through this period can be viewed through the following quotation:

as a primarily linear activity wherein teaching behaviors are considered “causes” and student learning is regarded as “effects”. This approach

emphasizes the actions of teachers rather than their professional judgments and attempts to capture the activity of teaching by identifying sets of discrete behaviors reproducible from one teacher and one classroom to the next. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, p.2).

The 1970s research was established on the paradigms of Behaviorism. Studies in this Behavioristic era produced inconsistent findings (Dunkin and Biddle, 1974), or having trivial results (McNamara, 1981). This was the first proposed reason by Calderhead. A second reason was due to the developments in cognitive sciences. Developments in cognitive psychology helped researchers understand that teachers' minds do affect teachers' mental beliefs. Theories in cognitive psychology emphasized the role of belief in how a person teach or learn. Thus, emphasis was put on those unobservable phenomena that affect the process of learning and teaching. A third reason is related to the rise of qualitative research. A provoking research of the qualitative nature was Jackson's (1968). The study described the practices of 50 elementary school teachers which was mentally based. Jackson's research influenced research in teachers' decision making, and differentiated between preactive and interactive teaching. Though Jackson's research worked as a framework for other researchers, it was later on noticed that decision making is not the only variable to be examined (Freeman, 1996). Such realization, allowed the field to include other areas like teachers' perceptions, reflections, and evaluations. This development led to a phase that called attention to both teachers' knowledge and beliefs. It was a shift to explore the "implicit theories" of teachers (Clark, 1988). Thus, teacher cognition studies had become a new domain of investigation (Allwright, 1988). Teachers' beliefs are, then, seen as "intuitive screens" (Goodman, 1988, p.130) affecting how teachers learn to teach, and how they teach.

Research in the field of teacher cognition is shifted to focus on three areas. Borg (2003), suggested that those areas are: 1) teachers' knowledge of grammar, 2) teachers' beliefs about grammar instruction, and 3) practices and cognitions in teaching grammar.

Regarding the first area, studies like (Chandler, Robinson, and Noyes 1988), (Williamson and Hardman 1995), (Wary, 1993), and (Andrews, 1991 & 1993), had shown inadequacies in teachers' knowledge of grammar. Andrews (1993) researched 82 trainees, and found that 50% of them had an inadequate understanding of grammar. Moreover, (Andrews, 1991) compared a native and non-native groups through explicitly testing their knowledge of grammar. Andrews found that non-native teachers of English did significantly better than the natives.

The second area, teachers' beliefs about grammar instruction, had been observed by a number of research papers. One study was done by Eisenstein-Ebsworth and Schweers (1997). Their study was done on 60 university ESL teachers from New York and Puerto Rico. They used questionnaires and interviews with eight of them. They found that Puerto Rican teachers were with the explicit teaching of grammar. One teacher said that: "grammar has always been part of our language learning experience" (Eisenstein-Ebsworth & Schweers, p.247). Another study was done by Chia (2003). Chia observed the teaching beliefs of 96 primary teacher in Singapore, and found that there is a tendency toward the formal instruction of grammar.

A study in the area of practices and cognitions in teaching grammar was by Borg (1998). It was on five English foreign language teachers in Malta. He suggested that teachers' explicit teaching of grammar was not due to their belief that it will enhance the learning process, but they think that students are expecting this kind of instruction; and the reaction of students' toward this type of instruction will be more positive. In addition, he assumed that teachers tend to shift from deductive and inductive strategies for teaching grammar.

The early studies may rise our attention to the distinction between implicit and explicit learning. A number of second language acquisition studies were summarized by DeKeyser, who suggested that: “there is very little hard evidence of learning without awareness” (2003, p.317). Other studies such as (N. Ellis, 1993; Rosa & O’Neill, 1999) suggested that the effectiveness of the explicit learning is more than the implicit learning. Doughty (1991), and Shook (1994), assumed that there are no clear differences between explicit and implicit learning.

Nassaji and Fotos (2011), saw that grammar teaching had passed three different stages. The first, put exclusive focus on the grammatical form. The second, shifted focus towards the meaningful input. The third, brought focus to the grammatical form and the meaningful communication. Rod Ellis (1993) assumed that explicit knowledge is turned into implicit if the learners are developmentally ready. Other research suggest that students need the ample time to practice and produce what they have learned. For instance, Lightbown and Spada (1993, p.105) turn focus to form-focused instruction, in which I quote:

Classroom data from a number of studies offer support for the view that form-focused instruction and corrective feedback provided within the context of a communicative program are more effective in promoting second language learning than programs which are limited to an exclusive emphasis on accuracy on the one hand or an exclusive emphasis on fluency on the other.

Long (1991) distinguished between three types which are: 1) focus-on-form, 2) focus-on-forms, and 3) focus-on-meaning. Focus on forms assumes that language consists of grammatical forms that can be acquired “sequentially and additively” (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011, p.10). The focus-on-meaning proposes that learners inductively learn language, and understand its grammar. Focus-on-form brings students’ attention to the linguistic form that is put in a meaningful context. Long (1991), assumes that it is the most effective of all. Long (1991, pp. 45-46) said: “ Focus-on-Form overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication.” He added, “ a syllabus with a Focus-on-Form teaches something else--biology, mathematics, workshop practice, automobile repair, the geography of the country where the foreign language is spoken, the cultures of its speakers, and so on” (pp. 45-46). Long excluded any kind of predetermined focus on form, and if there is any, it should be brief. Rod Ellis (2001), divided focus-on-form approach into: 1) planned, and 2) incidental. He argues that focus on the linguistic form is in both, and both primary’s focus ought to be on meaning. The difference is that in the planned form-focused instruction, forms are preselected from preselected texts; incidental form-focused instruction does not draw students’ attention to preselected forms, they occur naturally.

Grammar should be taught for a number of reasons. One reason is the important role played by the conscious attention to the form. Schmidt (2001) referred to it as noticing, who argues for this point as follows:

The concept of attention is necessary in order to understand virtually every aspect of second language acquisition (SLA), including the development of interlanguages (ILs) over time, variation within IL at particular points in time, the development of L2 fluency, the role of individual differences such as motivation, aptitude and learning strategies in L2 learning, and the ways interaction, negotiation for meaning, and all forms of instruction contribute to language learning.

(Schmidt, 2001, p. 3)

Though there is no general agreement on ‘noticing’, but according to Rod Ellis (2001), all agree on the importance of awareness to the form in second language learning.

A second reason is due to the fact that learners go through different stages of development. The idea of moving from one stage to another was proved by different studies like Piennann (1988), who claimed the teachability hypothesis. It assumes that learning goes through different fixed stages. Teaching grammar will not affect the proceeding from one stage to another, but it may facilitate it.

A third reason is due to the positive impact on the rate of movement from one stage to another. Researchers like (R. Ellis, 2001), and (N. Ellis, 1995) argued that grammar instruction facilitates the movement from one developmental stage to another. Noris and Ortega (2000) surveyed 49 studies on the effectiveness of explicit instruction, and reached the conclusion that: “ explicit instruction...results in substantial gains in the learning of target structures in comparisons to implicit instruction” (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004, p.129).

4.4 Design of the paper:

This paper aims to view teachers’ beliefs regarding the nature of grammar, importance of grammar and grammar instruction. In addition, it tries, briefly, to check whether gender plays a role in teachers’ beliefs. The design of the paper is a quantitative one with a survey design. The purpose of this design is to generalize inferences from the sample to the population. The instrument I used is a self-administered questionnaire. The instrument is divided into two parts. The first part collected background information. It included participants’ highest academic qualification, years of experience, and the level taught. The second part of the questionnaire is sub-parted into two parts. The first, tries to investigate teachers’ beliefs regarding the meaning of grammar. The second, tries to uncover the actual practices regarding the instruction of grammar. This part tried to understand whether teachers teach grammar implicitly or explicitly; whether they teach grammar in discrete situations, or within a context; and whether they immediately correct students’ grammatical mistakes or not. I analyzed the data through the SPSS software. I applied the Chi-square test to associate between teachers’ opinions and the items. Further, I used a t-test to find if there is any significant difference between male teachers’ beliefs and female teachers’ beliefs.

The population studied include the non-native, English language teachers at the tertiary level (Diploma, and Bachelor) in Yanbu Industrial City. The sample was chosen randomly and by convenience. 45 non-native English, male and female, teachers participated in the questionnaire. All participants are in-service teachers. 31 of them are Master degree holders; 11 teachers are Bachelor degree holders; 3 of the teachers are Doctorate holders. The Master degree holders represented 68.9% of the sample. Regarding their teaching experience, the arithmetic mean of their teaching years was about 14 years; only one participant did not enter his years of experience.

Table 1

Number of years of teaching experience

N	Valid	44
	Missing	1
Mean		14.1250

5. Results and discussion:

To understand teachers’ beliefs about grammar, I have analyzed data in the first subpart of part two. For the analysis I used the statistical Chi-square measurement. The participants had to choose from five alternatives starting from strongly agree, ending with strongly disagree. I used the SPSS software to help analyzing data. I have found that item

responses to: 1) grammar consists of rules of sentence formation, 2) grammar increases the accuracy of the learner, 3) grammar facilitates the use of language, and 4) grammar focuses on both form and meaning, were statistically significant with a P-value less than 0.05. Teachers' view of grammar as the accurate use of tenses was not significant.

By taking the traditional view of grammar, I believe that teachers have a good understanding of the nature of grammar. From the results, teachers believed that grammar helps formatting sentences; as also generative grammar suggests that the central role of grammar is mediating between form and meaning. Further, it is supported by the study done by Brumfit, Mitchell, and Hooper (1996), in which they found that teachers regarded knowledge of language as explicit grammar emphasizing the sentence-level. Moreover, teachers believed that grammar helps improving the learners' accuracy. Such belief can be accompanied by their belief that grammar facilitates the use of language. Further, teachers believed that there should be focus on both the linguistic form and meaning. This goes in a parallel line with the latest research that emphasizes the need to teach form as well as meaning. Such form and meaning focus is found in the latest teaching method of Form-Focused-Instruction (FFI). This teaching approach puts the form in a meaningful context.

Table 2

	Grammar consists of rules of sentence-formation	Grammar increases the accuracy of the learner	Grammar is the accurate use of tenses	Grammar facilitates the use of language	Grammar focuses on both form and meaning
Chi-Square	38.444 ^a	18.911 ^b	13.556 ^a	21.556 ^a	41.111 ^a
df	4	3	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.000	.009	.000	.000

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 9.0.

b. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 11.3.

The second subpart of part two of the questionnaire was about the importance of learning grammar, and its instruction. It contained five alternatives starting from strongly agree, ending in strongly disagree. The significant results are inferred with a P-value of less than 0.05.

Regarding the importance of learning grammar, teachers believe that grammar is an important component of language, and they should spend a lot of time teaching it. This belief is supported by a number of studies. One study says that grammar has a facilitative effect on the development of students' target language proficiency (Brumfit et al. 1996). In addition, Burgess and Etherington (2002) stated that teachers have a positive view of the formal instruction of grammar, and that it had a significant affect on the students.

In reference to grammar instruction, teachers believed that providing examples to teach rules are better than just prescribing them the rules. This supports their belief in subpart one which said that grammar is both form and meaning. Therefore, teachers understand that they should teach the form accompanied by its meaning in a meaningful context. Further, teachers believed that to teach grammar, students should focus on the form by doing drills and exercises. This is supported by Chia's study in 2003, which said that teachers focused on the drill exercises and the deductive teaching of grammar.

As I mentioned that teachers showed a good understanding for the need to teach the form in the context, teachers significantly believe that grammar should be taught in a context, i.e. in texts and dialogues. They significantly believe that grammar instruction should bring the form with the meaning. But, results were insignificant regarding the explicit teaching of grammar rules before providing examples. Teachers appear to go with the incidental focus on form.

Table 3

	Learning grammar is very important in learning language	A great deal of the class-time is dedicated for teaching grammar	I use examples instead of written rules to explain grammar	Students focus on form through drills and exercises	Grammar is taught within context
Chi-Square	23.356 ^a	25.778 ^b	34.444 ^b	38.222 ^b	27.333 ^b
df	3	4	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 11.3.

b. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 9.0.

c. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 11.0.

Table 4

	I describe rules then provide examples when teaching grammar	Form and meaning must be taught together
Chi-Square	8.667 ^b	17.636 ^c
df	4	3
Asymp. Sig.	.070	.001

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 11.3.

b. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 9.0.

c. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 11.0.

Regarding giving feedback to students and correcting them, teachers believed significantly that they should provide students with feedback which contributes to their grammar learning; and they believe that students should be corrected to help them learn grammar. Results were insignificant regarding the time of correction. Teachers believed that the immediate feedback and correction is not significant to grammar learning.

Table 5

	Giving feedback and correcting errors are important for learning grammar	Teachers should correct and explain students' errors	I immediately correct students' errors and give them feedback
Chi-Square	27.111 ^a	13.333 ^a	7.333 ^a
df	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.010	.119

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 9.0.

Regarding gender, I used a t-test to see whether there is a significant difference between male teachers' beliefs and female teachers' beliefs. No significant difference was found regarding teachers' beliefs. Gender seems to play no role in orienting beliefs.

6. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the field of teacher cognition is important to understand the mental lives of teachers. Such trait helps developing plans that works on developing the teacher him or herself, and the curriculum. Moreover, it explores the teachers' perception of language, and whether they will accept the teaching approaches forced by their institutions.

Teachers showed a good understanding of the nature of grammar. Moreover, they appreciated the importance of learning grammar to facilitate language learning. They spend a lot of time teaching grammar. They teach grammar through drills and exercises emphasizing the importance of explicit learning. This is supported by the conclusion of DeKeyser (2003, p.317) saying that: "there is very little hard evidence of learning without awareness." Further, teachers believe that form and meaning should be taught together; and that teaching form and meaning is best put when taught in a meaningful context as in dialogues.

Gender seems to play no role regarding teachers' beliefs. The results I found were insignificant to support any claim.

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