

Student Teachers' Views on Grammar and Grammar Teaching, and its Communication to their Students

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Abstract

The present article builds on the study entitled “English Grammar: Views of Student Teachers and Communication of Grammar to their Students” carried out under and submitted to University Grants Commission, Nepal. The study adopted the mixed-methods of questionnaire and semi-structured classroom observation. Against a brief theoretical background of grammar and grammar teaching and review of the related literature, the article presents respondent teachers' views on grammar and grammar teaching collected by means of a set of questionnaire. Their views are further compared with the classroom data collected by observation. It is found that there is a lack of congruence between the teachers' views, and their actual classroom practices in the areas, such as methods, techniques, resources and activities. Finally, the article presents conclusion and some pedagogical recommendations for teachers and teacher educators.

Keywords: Grammar teaching, Student teachers, Classroom practice, Methods, Resources

Introduction

The importance of grammar in teaching English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL/) cannot be overrated. However, the existing literature reveals conflicting views prevalent among English teachers, ELT trainers, textbook writers, and syllabus designers as to its place in ESL/EFL courses and its role in learning English. In the words of Thornbury (1999), “Grammar teaching has always been one of the most controversial and least understood aspects of language teaching”

(p. ix). Changing views on language, language learning and language learners show that grammar teaching has a checkered history, occupying both central and peripheral positions in different ELT approaches and methods.

Different degrees of importance to grammar have been attached by different approaches and methods of second language education over the history and across the globe. The Grammar Translation Method, for instance, equates study of a language with study of its grammar and vice versa. Conversely, the Direct Method

eschews explicit teaching of grammatical items and advocates for the inductive way of teaching. Firmly grounded in the linguistic theory of structuralism and psychological theory of behaviorism, the Audiolingual Method also rejects explicit instruction on grammatical points. Likewise, the school of thought led by Krashen (1985) sees no value of grammar explanation to language learners. Krashen and others argue that effects of formal instruction on grammar learning are “peripheral and fragile” (as cited in Thornbury, 1999, p. 14) because learned grammar knowledge does not become acquired knowledge and it cannot be at users’ disposal when required for normal communication.

The arguments that disregard explicit teaching of grammar, however, cannot be accepted without questioning. Cognitive approaches, namely McLaughlin’s information-processing model, Anderson’s Active Control of Thought (ACT) and connectionism, and Long’s interaction hypothesis and Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory (Mitchell & Myles, 2004) question Krashen’s contention that grammar teaching is not only futile, but also harmful in the learner’s overall language achievement. In this regard, Mitchell (1994a p. 90) cites Rutherford (1987) who argues “for a productive role for ‘grammatical consciousness-raising’ with respect to critical features of the target language system”. Rutherford’s argument conforms to what Richards and Rynandya (2004) state:

In recent years, grammar teaching has regained its rightful place in the language curriculum. People now agree that grammar is too important to be ignored, and that without a good

knowledge of grammar, learners’ language development will be severely constrained. (p. 145)

Highlighting the role of grammar in language learning, Nunan (1988) also quotes Rutherford (1987), who maintains that, “the abandonment of grammar as the pivotal element in the syllabus may be premature” (p. 34).

A similar view echoes in the recent learner-/learning-centered approaches, such as Long’s (1997) Task-based Language Teaching, VanPatten’s (1996) Processing Instruction, and Nunan’s (1998) Grammar in Context (Cowan, 2009, pp. 34-36) that emphasize the balance between fluency (meaning) and accuracy (form) accompanied by restructuring. The balance can be achieved by relating form to meaning via meaningful and context-sensitive instruction. These approaches redefine nature and role of grammar instruction in learners’ overall language development. The current trend of grammar teaching underlies what Thornbury (1999) calls “paying-attention-to-form argument” (p. 24). This argument subsumes the two influential theoretical concepts in teaching grammar: consciousness-raising and focus on form. The former requires learners to notice grammatical points and the latter to use them in meaningful activities. There are different ways of promoting students’ noticing. Input flooding, text modification, teacher-student interaction and peer interaction are some of the frequently used activities by the teacher for this purpose.

As a teacher educator, I taught an advanced grammar course ‘English Grammar for Teachers’ to master’s degree students for six years. The course has now

been replaced by a similar course 'English Usage and Use'. The theoretically motivated course exposed the student teachers to a) theoretical knowledge of grammar in general, b) theoretical knowledge of pedagogical grammar, c) theoretical knowledge of English grammar, and d) practice on English grammar. The course expected the students to teach English grammar to the students through communicative and task-based activities by exploiting a wide range of resources and techniques. Against the theoretical background presented above and the objectives of the course, I wanted to find out what these trainee teachers thought about grammar, grammar teaching, and how they communicated grammar knowledge to their students in the actual classroom context.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

- i. What were the student teachers' views on grammar and grammar teaching?
- ii. What types of methods, techniques, activities and resources did they use to communicate grammar points to their students?
- iii. To what extent were they communicating grammar knowledge to their students the way they thought it should be taught?

Literature Review

Williams (1994) surveys teachers' views of grammar prevalent in the ELT community. These views are summarized as: a) grammar as a collection of shibbolethic

rules; b) grammar as parts of speech; c) grammar as a set of rules; and d) grammar as the relationship between forms and functions.

To elaborate each, the first view proscribes and prescribes standard rules while the second view confines grammar to sentence level. Similarly, to follow the third view is to treat grammar as a set of rules that characterizes well-formed sentences. This structural view focuses on word order, and structural elements of the given sentence, without making any explicit reference to meaning. The last view transcends sentence grammar and encompasses discourse grammar. This view is primarily concerned with the interaction between structures and their functions in real life use.

From the pedagogical perspective, communicative grammar should be given priority over other grammars, for it is not only about the rules of a language, but also about the rules of language use that takes into account of sociolinguistic and discourse factors. Moreover, it treats grammar as a skill.

To move to teachers' views of how grammar *should be* taught and how *it is* actually taught in the classroom, Mitchell's (1994 b) study shows a lack of congruence between these two aspects. Drawing on the findings, Mitchell concludes:

The foreign language teachers generally claimed to teach in a 'communicative' way, with a pupil-centered, topic-based approach. However, almost all were following course books with a syllable based on a systematic grammatical progression, though it appeared that the structures of the syllabus were

generally taught inductively, using a traditional three-part cycle of presentation-practice-exploitation. (p. 216)

This suggests that the teachers in Mitchell's study were not practicing what they were preaching. Zain (2007) has a similar finding to report from the Malaysian context. Based on the findings, Zain has come up with three patterns of relationship between the teachers' views, and two stages of teaching: planning and implementation: some aspects of their beliefs which were not reflected at the planning stage were reflected during instructional implementation; some aspects of their beliefs were incongruent at both stages of teaching, and other aspects of their beliefs were congruent at both stages of teaching.

In this regard, Richards (2008) makes a similar observation. To write in Richards' words, "Recent research (e.g. Bartels, 2005) shows that teachers often fail to apply such knowledge (knowledge about language and language learning) in their own teaching" (p. 5). Indicating at the incongruence between thoughts and actions, Richards further writes, "Despite knowing the theory and principles associated with Communicative Language Teaching, for example, teachers are often seen to make use of traditional 'grammar-and-practice' techniques in their own classrooms."

The gap between what teachers learn in academic courses and how they transfer their learning to teaching has been indicated by Karn (2006) as, "It is very unfortunate that the theoretical knowledge obtained from ELT courses is not put into practice during real teaching" (p. 77). In a similar vein, Adhikari (2010) concludes that even the teachers, who had sound

theoretical knowledge about current teaching approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching were mostly, used the deductive approach while teaching English to their students.

Commenting on the current trends of classroom practices of grammar teachers, Savage, Bitterlin and Price (2010) maintain that "more and more practitioners realize that the two orientations - grammar-based and communicative - have elements that complement each other and that, when combined, can result in an eclectic approach that is effective in teaching grammar to adult students" (p. 10). This middle-way teaching approach calls for the active involvement of the teacher as a wise-synthesizer rather than a mere follower of the expert-prescribed methods. In the view of Larsen-Freeman (2004, p. 183), such principled eclecticism requires the teachers to blend their thoughts with actions accompanied by regular reflection on their own teaching in light of how they view language learning and teaching and what they actually do in the classroom.

Recently, there has been a shift from expert-driven teaching methods to classroom-oriented pedagogy. Such a shift has been not only indicated but also strongly suggested in the works of Prabhu (1987), Brown (2001), Kumaravadivelu (2006), and Holliday (2006). The shift from experts to teachers has been felt necessary because of the gap between what experts, while designing ESL/EFL courses, think about the 'best way' of teaching, and how teachers perceive what they teach and how they actually teach it to their students. The changing trend also foregrounds the democratic approach to second language pedagogy which underlines the

involvement of key stakeholders in any decision-making process. Teachers, no doubt, are one of such stakeholders whose role is of paramount importance from policy level to classroom implementation.

Mitchell (1994a) is of the opinion that the role of grammar in language teaching has to be studied from the teacher's perspectives. In this regard, Mitchell takes the stance as "the translation of methodological advice into the actual classroom experiences of language learners remains the responsibility of teachers, not 'expert' methodologists" (pp. 90-91). It is therefore important that we analyze what English teachers think about grammar, grammar teaching and how they actually teach it to their students. This argument runs in line with what Mitchell posits "teachers are by no means 'implementation machines' as far as innovatory methodological advice is concerned" (p.91). This study was directed towards these areas of grammar pedagogy previously not touched by any researchers in Nepal.

Research Design and Procedures

The study adopted a survey design with the mixed-methods of questionnaire and classroom observation. The student teachers who had studied the course "English Grammar for Teachers" at Master's level and who were teaching English at secondary level in Kathmandu Valley formed the total universe of this study. Altogether 30 teachers were selected by using purposive sampling, and out of them 15 respondents, after the administration of the questionnaire, were selected by using the same sampling strategy for the purpose of class observation. The use of this sampling strategy was motivated by the practical

factors, such as geographical proximity, availability of respondents at a certain time, easy accessibility, and their willingness to volunteer (Dornyei, 2007). The questionnaire comprised close-ended and open-ended items (See App. A). Moreover, a semi-structured observation scheme was developed to collect information about the teachers' classroom practices (See App. B). The observation was also supplemented with notes and audio recording. Two lessons of each selected teacher were observed to ensure consistency of information. Ethical factors such as taking prior consent, clarifying the purpose of the study, and ensuring their confidentiality were taken into account before data collection. The data were analyzed with the help of simple descriptive statistics and narrative analysis. Percentage was used for the former while the thematic analysis was used for the latter.

Findings and Discussion

The respondents' views on grammar and grammar teaching, and the methods, techniques and resources they claimed that they used while teaching English grammar are discussed in light of their congruence or incongruence with the actual classroom teaching.

Views on English grammar

Seventy percent respondents agreed that *English grammar is a set of rules that prescribes what is right and what is wrong in English*, while the rest disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. For the 90 % of respondents *English grammar is a skill that enhances competence in other skills in English*. Table 1 below summarizes their views on grammar:

Table 1. Views on English grammar

English grammar	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Set of rules	30	40	26	4	100
Skill for learning other skills	57	33	10		100

Table 1 shows the student teachers' inclination to the communicative dimension of grammar rules. These views concur with that of Larsen-Freeman's view of grammar as 'a fifth skill' (2007), a separate skill that contributes to acquisition of other four major language skills.

One might expect that those who regarded grammar as a skill would communicate grammar points to their students by encouraging them to what Vale and Feuntuem call "experience and experiment" (2010, p. 28). The teachers with the communicative awareness of teaching would engage the students in group work and pair work. However, their actual teaching did not reflect many of such tenets of the communicative and experiential approach. The majority (80%) of the teachers resorted to whole-class teaching. As a result, pair work and group work were missing from their lessons which pushed student participation to the fringe. Only 20 percent of the observed lessons incorporated pair work and group work. The majority of the lessons were found to be less congruent with their views on grammar.

Methods and techniques of presenting grammar

The majority agreed with the statement that *grammar points are best presented inductively*

and only a small number of respondents believed the opposite. Table 2 below summarizes their responses:

Methods	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Inductive	60	27	13	0	100
Deductive	10	10	60	20	100
Texted-based	64	30	6		100

Table 2. Methods of presenting grammar points

This shows that the teachers gave more priority to the indirect (inductive and task-based) ways of presenting grammar points to their students. These views seem to be in line with their views on grammar as a skill discussed above. The respondents were in very much of the opinion that the students should be engaged in what Thornbury (1999) calls "the rule-discovery path" instead of "rule-driven path" (p. 49).

To go deeper into the matter, the respondents were also asked to mention any two methods that they preferred to use while teaching grammar. They came up with a number of methods ranging from grammar-translation to the communicative. Table 3 below summarizes

various methods they mentioned that they would use to communicate grammar points to their students:

Table 3. Methods preferred by the respondents

Methods	Percentage
Inductive	73
Deductive	20
Communicative	33
Task-based	3
Translation	3

According to Table 3, the vast majority of the respondents claimed that they used the inductive and meaning-first methods of teaching more than direct and explicit presentation of rules. For instance, the inductive, the communicative and the task-based were the most preferred methods whereas deductive and grammar Translation were the least preferred ones. Interestingly, one can see the congruence between respondents' views on English grammar, their views on the best ways of presenting grammar points, and the methods they claimed to use to teach grammar points to their students.

However, their views and preferences, or claims, contradicted with the methods they actually adopted in the presentation of grammar points in the classroom. Contrary to the variety of methods they suggested, inductive and deductive were the only two that dominated all the lessons. Of them, 80 percent of the lessons were based on the deductive way of rule presentation. For many teachers, talking about the rules explicitly seemed a norm. For example, the following are some of the ways the majority began their grammar lessons:

What is a conditional sentence?

How many types of conditional sentence are there?

Do you know where 'be going to' is used?

Okay, look at the structure of simple present on the board.

Only the 20 percent of the observed lessons were based on the inductive method. Those who adopted an inductive way of presentation often began their lessons by setting up the context and eliciting the target structures from the students.

Furthermore, the respondents were asked to mention any three techniques they preferred to use to teach grammar. This

Techniques	Percentage
Dramatization/Role-play	37
Group discussion/Group work/Pair work	40
Total physical response (TPR)	7
Problem-solving	7
Translation	7
Discovery	7
Drilling	13
Dictation	7
Story-telling	7
Information gap	3

item elicited a number of techniques which are presented below in Table 4:

Table 4: Techniques preferred by the respondents

The majority of the teachers preferred meaning-focused techniques i.e. dramatisation, group discussion/group work/pair work, TPR, problem-solving, discovery, story-telling, and traditional structure-focused techniques that included translation and drilling. The teachers mostly preferred those techniques that

would engage their students in communicative practice to enhance “structure-social function match and structure-discourse match” (Celce-Murcia and Hilles, 1988, p. 13).

Despite their preference, the majority of them heavily inclined to whole-class teaching via the structure-focused technique of explanation. Table 5 below presents the techniques that the teachers mostly used in the classroom:

Table 5. Techniques used in the classroom

Techniques	Percentage
Explanation (demonstration)	40
Demonstration (explanation)	33
Elicitation (explanation)	27
Total	100

Of the observed lessons, 40 % were dominated by the explanation technique. After explaining the grammar points, the teachers demonstrated them on the board, sentence cards or flipcharts. In 33 percent of the lessons the teachers first demonstrated the grammar items on the board, sentence cards or flipcharts and then explained each in detail before engaging students in practice. These two techniques were used to present grammar points directly to the students. On the other hand, those who presented grammar points indirectly resorted to the elicitation technique. The teachers first set up the situation and then elicited the relevant sentences from the students. The elicited sentences were further explained by the teacher again. In all cases,

explanation occurred either as a main technique or subordinate technique.

Grammar practice activities

The notion that grammar points should be practiced in meaning-focused activities such as drama activities, interview and role-play was strongly agreed by 33 % and agreed by 50 % of the respondents. Sixty percent of the respondents rejected the notion that grammar points should be practiced in structure-focused activities, such as fill-in the blanks, transformation and true/false.

Their views on the practice activities largely concurred with their views on and preference to the methods and techniques. Methods and practice activities both, as they opined, should be meaning-focused and learner-centered. However, the classroom observation shows a different picture. That is, there was incongruence between their views on the nature of practice activities and the actual activities that their students were engaged in.

Contrary to their emphasis on meaning-focused activities such as role-play, storytelling, pair work and group work, most of the time their students were practicing in structure-focused activities, such as Changing the Sentences According to the Examples, Matching, Making Sentences for the Patterns.

Models of integrating grammar points

Models of integration	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
The PPP model	30	57	13		100
The TTT model	47	40	10	3	100

Two of the statements were concerned with the ways of integrating grammar points into the overall lesson plan. Table 6 below presents their views on the models of integrating grammar points:

Table 6. Models of integrating grammar points

Their views on the PPP (Presentation-Practice-Production) model concurred with the actual classroom practice. All the observed lessons were exclusively based on this model i.e. the teachers began their lessons with the presentation of the new grammar points either deductively or inductively; the students practiced the presented points in a controlled way by means of different activities, and they were involved in less controlled activities. So far as the second model of integration i.e. TTT (Task-Teach-Task) is concerned, no teacher was found following it despite the majority agreeing with the notion that grammar points should be integrated by engaging the students in task performance.

Resources for teaching grammar

The respondents were asked to mention any three resources that they most frequently used for teaching grammar. Stories, games, and songs/verses were the most preferred resources while newspapers were the least preferred one. Drama and dialogues fell in between them. The types of resources they mentioned are given below in Table 7:

Table 7. Resources preferred by the respondents

Resources	Percentage
Stories	57

Games	53
Drama and dialogue	33
Songs and verse	50
Pictures/Realia	10
Newspapers	7

As to teaching, most of these resources were found in use although with low frequency. The resources such as drama and games were not used at all, while textbook example sentences were the mostly used resource. However, no teacher had made the mention of this resource while responding to the open-ended questionnaire items that asked them to list any three resources that they preferred to use. Table 8 below presents the resources they used:

Table 8. Resources used in the classroom

Used resources	Percentage
Stories	13
Dialogues	13
Pictures	20
Textbook example sentences	47
Newspapers	7

Table 8 shows that textbook example sentences were the mostly used and newspapers were the least used resources to introduce and practice grammar points. The resources such as stories, dialogues, pictures and newspapers were used mainly to introduce the points inductively while the example sentences were used to orient students directly to target structures.

Stories and dialogues were used directly from the textbook itself. Pictures were of two types: those given in the textbook and those from the teacher's own collection. A large number of grammar lessons mainly exploited the sentence-level resource, possibly because they were easy to use and they did not require preparation time. Also, such sentences helped the students establish one-to-one relationship between examples and the target grammar points easily and quickly.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the foregoing discussion, I draw the following conclusions and make some recommendations for teachers and teacher educators:

- The surveyed teachers' views on grammar and grammar teaching echoed most of the tenets of the current trends in grammar teaching such as learner involvement, collaborative learning, and task-based activities. However, their grammar teaching was inclined to the traditional and teacher-centered approach lacking in learner-centered activities.
- Despite their perception of grammar as a skill and heavy inclination, in their views, to the communicative dimension, they were treating grammar as a set of rules rather than a skill in the actual classroom. One of the possible reasons could be the setting of the classroom itself, as in terms of arrangement all the classrooms were traditional (i.e. having immovable furniture arranged in rows) calling for whole-class teaching and preventing easy mobility required for pair work and group work. It is important that we train our teachers to capitalize on the classroom constraints to increase students' active involvement through pair work and group work. Each bench, for example, can be treated as a group, or four students sitting together can be put in two pairs while carrying out the given task.
- Contrary to their claim and preference, almost all teachers were following the deductive way of teaching and using the teacher-centered techniques such as explanation and demonstration. The teachers should think of how they can engage their students in the communicative practice through such learner-centered techniques as dramatization and problem-solving.
- Despite their high opinions of the recent trend of teaching grammar through task performance, all the teachers were teaching grammar using a three-part cycle of PPP. When interpreted their inclination to this model in light of the textbooks they were teaching, it is the model clearly outlined for the teachers to follow by the textbook writers.
- Many teachers seemed to be aware of the recent trend of integrating grammar points into the language lesson through tasks. However, they failed to translate this awareness into classroom practice. Since the textbooks present grammar in the traditional PPP model, the nature of the books itself seems to be one of the causes of disparity between their views and actual classroom teaching. In such a case, the only option for them is to use the existing textbooks as reference materials and design their own

grammar lessons that require the students to work on the given task.

- Most of them relied on the textbook rather than using the resources from the library and the Internet. Grammar teaching should expose the students to the three different dimensions of grammar: form/structure, meaning and function. For this, the teachers should present grammar points through a variety of resources such as pictures and realia for structure-meaning match, drama and dialogue for structure-social function match, and stories, anecdotes, essays and newspaper articles for structure-discourse match. Moreover, teachers should decrease their dependency on the textbook and look for other resources available in the library and on the Internet to bring a variety and the outside world into grammar class.
- Finally, this study was limited in its scope in terms of the number of respondents, the number of lessons observed and the issues covered. A further research is therefore necessary to explore all the relevant factors that might have contributed to the gap between teachers' views on grammar and grammar teaching and their actual classroom practices. That is to say, it is necessary to carry out more comprehensive and qualitative type of study to explore Nepalese teachers' beliefs, and their way of teaching grammar with reference to instructional and contextual constraints.

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Appendix A

Teachers' Views on Grammar and Grammar Teaching

Direction: Please read each questionnaire item carefully and put a tick in the box under the given heading you agree with.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. English grammar is a set of rules that prescribes what is right and what is wrong in English.	30	40	26	4
2. English grammar is a skill that enhances competence in other skills in English.	57	33	10	
3. Grammar points are best presented inductively (teaching grammar from examples).	60	27	13	
4. Grammar points are best presented deductively (teaching grammar from rules).	10	10	60	20
5. Grammar points are best presented when they are integrated in the context through texts.	64	30	6	
6. Students should practice grammar in meaning-focused activities (e.g. dramatic activities, interview, role play, etc.).	33	50	17	
7. Students should practice grammar points in structure-focused activities (e.g. fill in the blanks, transformation, true/false, etc).	3	37	47	13
8. Grammar points are best integrated through the Presentation-Practice-Production model.	30	57	13	
9. Grammar points are best integrated through the Task-Teach-Task model.	47	40	10	3

1. Mention any two methods you prefer to use to teach grammar to your students.

i. _____

ii. _____

2. Mention any three resources (e.g. songs, verse, games, dramas, stories, etc) you prefer to use to teach grammar to your students.

i. _____

ii. _____

iii. _____

3. Mention any three techniques you prefer to use to teach grammar to your students.

i. _____

ii. _____

iii.

The researcher will be reached at balaramadhikari77@gmail.com if you wish to know more about the study.

The researcher will send you the findings of this research if interested.

Thank you for your cooperation!

Appendix B

General Scheme for Classroom Observation

Methods/ Ways of teaching	Techniques	Practice activities	Resources	Model of integration	Approaches to treating grammar points	Mode of interaction
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Contributor

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