ESL Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching Grammar

Hari Prasad Tiwari, PhD
Assistant Professor
Mahendra Multiple Campus, Nepalgunj
haritiwarimmc@gmail.com

Abstract

Teaching grammar is a crucial facet in the context of language teaching. Throughout history, various approaches including instructing based on rules, using examples, and employing texts have been utilized to teach grammar at various level. This qualitative study attempts to explore secondary level experienced ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers' beliefs concerning the teaching of grammar, employing an interpretive paradigm. In an effort to explore these beliefs, a sample of eight experienced ESL teachers participated in the investigation. I employed purposive sampling to select the participants. A semi-structured interview was employed as the primary research tool to capture their perceptions, pedagogical preferences, and underlying assumptions regarding grammar instruction from the participants. The collected data underwent rigorous thematic analysis to unveil recurring patterns, emergent themes, and variations in beliefs across the participant cohort. The study uncovers a diverse array of beliefs held by ESL teachers, spanning from the role of explicit grammar instruction to the integration of communicative approaches. Through the thematic analysis, common threads and discrepancies emerge, revealing the intricate interplay of factors shaping ESL teachers' pedagogical orientations. The implications of this research extend to the realms of teacher training, curriculum design, and educational policy. This study contributes to the broader discourse on teacher beliefs, offering valuable insights that can guide the development of tailored teacher development programs and evidence-based teaching strategies, ultimately enhancing the quality of ESL grammar instruction.

Introduction

Teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar play a significant role in shaping instructional practices and classroom dynamics. Understanding these beliefs is crucial for effective language pedagogy, as they influence decisions regarding curriculum design, instructional methods, and the overall learning experience for students (Al-Issa, 2005). Beliefs are deeply embedded in teachers' instructional decisions and practices. A research by Borg (1998) emphasizes that teachers' beliefs are not only individual but also shaped by various factors, including personal experiences, prior education, cultural background, and professional development. These beliefs can range from grammar-focused approaches to more communicative and context-based methodologies.

Investigating teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar is significant because it directly impacts the way language instruction is delivered in classrooms. Teachers' beliefs play a crucial role in shaping their instructional practices, classroom interactions, and curriculum decisions (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Understanding these beliefs can have important implications for educational policy, teacher training, and the overall effectiveness of grammar instruction. Research by Azad (2013) highlights the influential role of teachers' beliefs in shaping their classroom practices. Teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching can determine whether they prioritize explicit instruction, focus on communicative approaches, or adopt a combination of both. These beliefs can also influence the amount of time and emphasis devoted to grammar instruction within the curriculum. Furthermore, Debata (2013) underscores how teachers' beliefs can impact student learning outcomes. If teachers hold misconceptions or negative beliefs about teaching grammar, they might inadvertently hinder students' language development. On the other hand, teachers who have well-informed and positive beliefs about grammar instruction are more likely to implement effective strategies that enhance students' language skills. Considering the study Farrell and Lim (2005), investigating teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar can lead to improved professional development programs. Identifying teachers' existing beliefs and addressing any misconceptions through targeted training can result in more evidence-based instructional practices, ultimately benefiting students' language acquisition. In conclusion, the investigation of teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar is significant due to its direct influence on classroom practices, student learning outcomes, and the design of teacher training programs. Understanding these beliefs can lead to more effective language instruction and improved educational outcomes.

Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching Grammar

ESL teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar are multifaceted and influenced by a range of factors. Historically, many teachers held traditional grammar-focused beliefs, considering grammar as a fundamental element of language proficiency. Furthermore, their beliefs are rooted in the notion that a solid foundation in grammar is essential for language proficiency. Moreover, their beliefs are influenced by deductive method of teaching grammar. These teachers tend to emphasize explicit grammar instruction, rule memorization, and error

correction. A study by Andrews (2003) has shown that these beliefs are often influenced by teachers' own experiences as learners. Borg and Burns (2008) also noted that teachers with this perspective might prioritize explicit grammar instruction, rule-based learning, and accuracy in students' language use. These beliefs often stem from conventional teaching practices and an emphasis on standardized assessments.

In response to evolving language teaching paradigms, a shift towards communicative beliefs has been observed. Communicative belief of grammar instruction is influenced by inductive method of teaching grammar. These beliefs emphasize meaningful language use in authentic contexts. Researchers like Maqbali et al. (2019) have advocated for interactive and communicative language teaching, with teachers encouraging students to use grammar in real-life communicative situations. This perspective has gained traction in language teaching, with researchers like Ellis (2006) highlighting the importance of communication as a primary goal. ESL teachers who hold communicative beliefs prioritize authentic language use, interactive classroom activities, and student-centered learning.

Teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar also encompass cultural dimensions. ESL teachers who emphasize cultural awareness recognize the impact of cultural differences on language use Chia (2003) emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity in language instruction. Teachers with these beliefs recognize that grammar usage can vary across cultures and aim to contextualize grammar instruction within cultural and communicative frameworks. This perspective encourages teachers to consider language as a dynamic cultural phenomenon and incorporate intercultural competence into grammar instruction.

Many ESL teachers believe in integrating grammar instruction with other language skills. Alghanmi and Shukri (2016) emphasizes the interconnectedness of language skills and suggests that incorporating grammar within meaningful language tasks can enhance overall language proficiency. This aligns with the idea that grammar instruction should not be isolated but embedded in authentic language use. Studies focusing on teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar highlight the diverse range of perspectives that teachers hold. These beliefs stem from a combination of personal experiences, educational backgrounds, and professional development. Researchers have examined how these beliefs influence classroom practices and shape students' language learning experiences. Some teachers might blend both methods to cater to different learning styles and preferences. Others might strongly endorse one method over the other, influenced by their personal experiences as learners or their observations of what works best for their students.

As noted by Berman (1979), ESL teachers' beliefs are not static; they can evolve over time through professional development and exposure to new methodologies. Engaging in ongoing training, attending workshops, and collaborating with peers can contribute to shifts in teaching beliefs and practices. From traditional grammar-focused approaches to communicative and

context-based methodologies, these beliefs shape classroom practices and student learning experiences. Acknowledging and understanding the diversity of these beliefs is crucial for fostering effective language instruction and continuous professional development among ESL teachers.

Recent studies highlight the prevalence of beliefs that promote the integration of grammar with other language skills. ESL teachers increasingly understand that grammar is best learned when embedded in meaningful language tasks. This aligns with the notion proposed by Nassaj and Fotos (2011) that grammar instruction should be interconnected with reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities. Empirical evidence also suggests that teachers' beliefs are not static. Professional development opportunities, such as workshops, conferences, and collaborative learning communities, contribute to the evolution of teachers' beliefs. Rokni (2009) emphasizes the role of ongoing training in shaping teachers' practices and influencing their beliefs about effective grammar instruction.

The empirical literature on teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar demonstrates the dynamic nature of pedagogical perspectives in language education. From traditional grammar-centric beliefs to communicative approaches and cultural sensitivity, teachers' beliefs shape their instructional practices and influence students' language learning experiences. The interplay between these beliefs and professional development underscores the need for continuous learning and adaptation in the field of language teaching.

Despite the critical role of teachers' beliefs in shaping instructional practices and student learning outcomes, there exists a gap in understanding the specific beliefs held by ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers regarding the teaching of grammar. The complex interplay between teachers' personal beliefs, educational background, professional development, and cultural factors in the context of ESL grammar instruction remains relatively unexplored. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the underlying beliefs, misconceptions, and pedagogical preferences of ESL teachers when it comes to teaching grammar, with the aim of uncovering insights that can inform effective teacher training programs and curriculum development.

Methodology

The study is based on interpretive research paradigm and qualitative method of research. The sample population consisted of eight secondary level English teachers (four from community and four from institution schools) who have been teaching English at secondary level for more than five years. I employed purposive sampling to select the schools and sample population. The selected teachers were named as T1 to T8 for anonymity. I used semi- structured interview technique to collect the data. The interview was audio recorded by taking written consent from the participants. The data was analyzed thematically based on thematic approach to data analysis. The steps involved encompassed getting acquainted with the data, transcribing,

forming initial codes, identifying patterns, evaluating and categorizing those patterns, and conducting the analysis. The data produced by the collective was prioritized over individual inputs. As a result, the focus was on analyzing groups as cohesive entities, treating them akin to distinct units of individual data in a consistent manner.

Findings and Discussion

The data revealed that the secondary level ESL teachers hold six beliefs about teaching grammar. The subsequent section presents and examines these six distinct themes as the focal points of the research.

Teachers Beliefs about the Procedure of Grammar Teaching

The majority of teachers held the view that a formal understanding of grammar is crucial for achieving proficiency in a foreign or second language, particularly within a classroom setting. They also emphasized the importance of practicing a second language in scenarios that mirror real-life situations, prioritizing practical application over dissecting and rehearsing grammatical structures. In fact, they favored incorporating grammar into authentic communication rather than solely analyzing grammar rules. Furthermore, these instructors were of the opinion that students' ability to communicate effectively improves most rapidly when they engage with and practice the grammar of the target language. Overall, out of the eight teachers sampled, there was a consensus that learning grammar plays a beneficial role in the process of acquiring a foreign or second language. Based on responses from semi-structured interviews, the majority of participants disagreed with the notion that English can be absorbed without explicit grammar instruction. They maintained that a formal teaching and learning approach is necessary for students to grasp English grammar. Additionally, the participants emphasized the significance of practical exercises in mastering English grammar. In instances where students encountered challenges in learning English, many teachers expressed a level of comfort in explaining grammar concepts using the students' native language. This approach was considered a useful tool for delivering effective grammar lessons. While recognizing the potential for interference from a student's first language leading to errors, the teachers believed that such errors are less likely to be picked up by peers when students collaborate in group activities. The collective sentiment expressed by the respondents strongly supports the idea that teaching grammar is indispensable for English language learners. Moreover, the participants of the study highlighted the foundational role of grammar in facilitating communication, echoing the sentiment of one respondent. The participants advocated for an English grammar curriculum that centers around the functional aspects of the language. For example, one of the participants, T3, shared the perspective that:

> When instructing English grammar, the teacher's emphasis should center on the grammatical rules, as this approach enhances students' enjoyment of learning by providing them with a clear framework. Often, students struggle to infer these rules independently, underscoring the necessity of directing attention to the structure and contextual explanations of grammar.

According to the results, teachers in the Nepalese setting exhibited a preference for both teaching grammar methods. Nonetheless, the teachers expressed a greater inclination towards the deductive approach, citing their familiarity with this supplementary style of English grammar instruction. Furthermore, the teachers regarded both techniques as appropriate within the Nepalese context.

Teachers' Beliefs about Methods of Teaching Grammar

The outcomes revealed a preference among teachers for explicit grammar instruction, involving clear delineation and direct explanation of grammar rules to students. Interestingly, the teachers held a general inclination towards imparting grammar implicitly as well. Additionally, there was a consensus that the choice between inductive and deductive methods for teaching grammar hinged on the specific grammar points being addressed. However, the teachers did not endorse the notion that the choice of teaching method should depend solely on the preferences of teachers and students, nor did they believe that the complexity of the targeted grammar elements should dictate the instructional approach. Curiously, the participants fundamentally disagreed with the idea that grammar should only be introduced when it naturally arises in materials or communication. When queried about the grammar methodology adopted in their classrooms and the rationale behind their decisions, all teachers concurred that the inductive approach was theoretically sound. Nevertheless, they expressed challenges in its implementation due to demanding preparation and a lack of accessible supplementary materials, leading them to lean towards the deductive approach. They argued that the inductive method didn't align with their students' proficiency levels, as students encountered difficulties in deducing grammar rules and struggled to complete assigned tasks. Additionally, they believed that adopting an inductive strategy would hinder the comprehensive coverage of the syllabus within the allotted timeframe. To illustrate, T4 remarked:

> While superior to the direct method of grammar instruction, the inductive approach we employ might pose challenges for our students in grasping diverse grammar concepts and consistently fulfilling assigned tasks. Furthermore, the dearth of materials could potentially complicate the implementation of the inductive method.

Every teacher was in consensus that the deductive method of teaching grammar was better suited for their classes due to its ease of application, time-saving attributes, and alignment with their students' skill levels. Additionally, teachers noted that the deductive approach effectively aided students in test preparation. The teachers emphasized that their students exhibited a preference for the deductive method. A specific teacher, exemplified by T6, articulated that the deductive grammar instruction brought about more advantages, as illustrated in the subsequent excerpt.

> In my opinion, the deductive approach proves more efficient in imparting grammar to our students. This method enables them to grasp the rules comprehensively, consequently enhancing their exam readiness. It would be more advantageous for them to possess a direct understanding of grammar rules.

The teachers' answers unveiled that their prior educational background played a role in shaping their choice of employing deductive instructional techniques within their classrooms. Drawing from their personal experiences as students, the teachers contended that the deductive method facilitated a clearer comprehension of grammar rules. For example, T1 highlighted her reliance on her own schooling encounter to address any obstacles her present students encountered during grammar learning, as illustrated in the ensuing passage:

> I think that my own learning journey has guided me in determining how to teach grammar. This experience has equipped me to support my students in navigating the difficulties I personally faced during my own education.

The collected information also unveiled that a majority of teachers hadn't taken part in any instructional programs, leading them to feel responsible for selecting the suitable teaching approach. T3, for example, asserted: "We attended workshops when necessary, but there was no specific guidance on inductive and deductive grammar instruction. The decision on which approach to use is left to us, although I believe workshops on this topic are crucial."

From this, we can deduce that teachers were under the impression that using the inductive method wasn't mandatory, granting them the freedom to choose between the deductive and inductive approaches. The findings demonstrated that teachers leaned towards employing strategies aligned with deductive grammar instruction. Additionally, the results indicated that despite recognizing the merits of inductive grammar teaching, all teachers employed strategies rooted in deductive grammar instruction within their classrooms. The teachers linked their preference for the deductive approach to various external factors such as students' language proficiency and needs, time limitations, textbook content, and curriculum demands.

Teachers' Beliefs about the Need of Correction in Teaching Grammar
In a broad sense, the participants exhibit a notable inclination towards treating error correction with significance. In essence, they reject the notion that only errors disrupting comprehension should be rectified. This implies that the participants advocate for teachers to address grammatical errors in the classroom, even when these errors don't hinder the understanding of the message.

Similarly, the findings indicate that the surveyed teachers don't overlook grammar mistakes in the pursuit of bolstering students' confidence and fluency. Notably, they don't strongly endorse the utilization of recasts as a means of error correction. To put it differently, the participants don't typically interrupt their students' speech to have them repeat a corrected version, indirectly aiming to raise their awareness about the mistake. Moreover, the teachers in the sample generally hold reservations about the idea of promptly correcting students' grammar errors as soon as they arise. As exemplified by T7's response:

> I interrupt them (students) and ask them to rephrase their statement in a corrected manner, aiming to indirectly make them aware of the mistakes.

Out of the respondents who shared their individual techniques for rectifying students' grammar errors during speech, four of them mentioned that they opt to wait until their students have concluded their speech before providing corrections. For instance, T6 offered the following insight:

> I wait until they've completed their speech and then offer corrections. I refrain from correcting a student in the midst of their sentence. My corrections are reserved for instances when the student makes a grammatical error we have previously discussed.

Similarly, T2's approach is as follows:

> I allow them to finish expressing their idea before providing corrections. In cases of multiple errors, I may utilize the board, addressing the mistakes after their speech concludes. I exercise patience and rectify their errors at the end, using similar examples, when my aim is to encourage communicative expression. However, in the context of a drill exercise, I promptly correct errors for all students regardless of their proficiency level.

These findings corroborated the practices that the participants had previously indicated. Notably, one participant declined to outline a specific approach to address error correction, suggesting that her choice hinges on the specific emphasis of her lessons. In terms of error correction, the overarching trend was that nearly all teachers refrained from immediately correcting students' mistakes as they occur, despite the considerable variation in each teacher's unique correction methods. Furthermore, although the teachers in the sample didn't explicitly state their focus on fluency, a majority of the responses implied that they indeed prioritize fluency and the substance of students' expressions. This was evident in their tendency to allow students to complete their thoughts and ideas before intervening for correction.

Teachers Beliefs about Role of Practice in Teaching Grammar
While practice is frequently deemed highly essential in language acquisition, it's crucial to ascertain the viewpoints of secondary level English educators regarding the role of practice in teaching grammar. The findings suggested that the participants generally view practice as significantly important for students to achieve proficiency in grammar concepts. Furthermore, they are inclined to endorse the idea that grammar ought to be exercised in both spoken and written contexts. Overall, practice emerges as a fundamental element in the mastery of grammar, according to their perspectives.

Teachers' Beliefs about the challenges of Teaching Grammar
The semi-structured interviews unveiled the contextual factors influencing traditional teacher beliefs and practices regarding grammar instruction, as well as the challenges encountered when attempting to implement the inductive teaching method. The first identified factor was

time constraints. The implicit teaching of grammar through situational contexts and visual aids was perceived as time-consuming, particularly as the entire curriculum needed coverage due to exam requirements. Additionally, issues such as overcrowded classrooms, low student motivation, and challenges in classroom management were frequently cited. T4's comment exemplified this sentiment:

> Engaging 64 students in activities within a 45-minute class is unfeasible. Noise levels are high, and teacher control is limited. We lack the authority to address disruptive behavior, and we can't remove problematic students from the class. Students are indifferent as primary school failure is rare; they pass regardless. Only a minority are motivated to learn, succeeding with any approach. The majority pose challenges. The classroom setup, with strict rows, obstructs communicative activities.

Another predicament concerned textbooks. Teachers critiqued textbooks for their lack of explicit grammar instruction, relying on students to implicitly grasp grammar through speech and repetition. T7 noted:

> I aspire to implement a communicative approach to grammar instruction, but students seem uninterested. While I believe grammar can be absorbed implicitly, textbooks fall short. They lack communicative activities and visual resources.

A different teacher noted that the textbooks stress speaking, yet anticipate students to grasp grammar without direct instruction, creating a contradiction. The teacher advocated for boxes introducing target grammar concepts within units. Nearly all teachers shared the belief that students struggle with English. They disclosed that students avoided reading English books, leading to an inadequate understanding of the language. Teachers even revealed that students lacked basic knowledge of grammar terms like verbs or adjectives in English, necessitating explanations in Nepali. Community school students were accustomed to teacher-led learning and explicit explanations, causing exhaustion and disinterest when faced with higher expectations.

Lastly, teachers indicated a dearth of specialized training in teaching English to secondary-level students. They acknowledged a lack of formal training, leading to a mix of both effective and ineffective strategies borrowed from others.

Teachers' Beliefs about the Role of Metalanguage in teaching Grammar

The current study delves into an additional subject of interest, which involves exploring the viewpoints of secondary-level English teachers regarding the utilization of metalanguage during grammar instruction. Contrary to common assumptions, the teachers involved in this research don't share the perspective that metalanguage should exclusively be reserved for advanced English language learners. In simpler terms, the participants don't hold the belief that metalanguage should only be employed with learners who have reached an advanced level in English. Generally speaking, the teachers, however, are of the opinion that incorporating

metalanguage into grammar teaching is crucial. Furthermore, they are of the view that introducing and employing metalanguage in grammar classes should apply to learners at all levels of proficiency, enabling a swifter and more effective grasp of grammar lessons.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis and interpretation of the findings, the conclusion drawn is that no single method holds absolute efficacy in grammar instruction. Rather, methods can be chosen and tailored to suit the learners' proficiency level, course characteristics, and teaching context. The amalgamation of various methods enriches the grammar classroom experience, rendering it both effective and meaningful. A judicious selection and combination of different methods within the classroom environment prove beneficial in motivating learners, sparking interest, and evoking curiosity. As a result, this approach contributes to enhancing students' learning outcomes. To nurture grammatical proficiency among learners and achieve desired results, it's advantageous to devise methods that address the specific classroom needs, moving away from conventional grammar teaching practices. The practice of integrating and choosing diverse methods imbues the classroom with vitality, fostering a vibrant learning community, and alleviating students' monotony, while simultaneously reducing the burden and fatigue on teachers.

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