

Teacher Beliefs on How English Language Grammar Should Be Taught

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to analyse the teacher beliefs on how English Language grammar should be taught in Luanshya District on the Copperbelt province of Zambia. The study was purely qualitative as it adopted a qualitative descriptive design. The sample size was Twelve (12), which involved 12 teachers of English as a Second Language who were purposefully sampled. Data was collected through interviews using semi-structured interview guides. Data was analyzed thematically grouping similar themes together so as to integrate meaning. The findings had indicated that the teachers believed that English Language grammar should be taught explicitly using deductive techniques as attested by their responses. The respondents described a similar progression of a grammar lesson where the teacher begins the lesson with a situation or brainstorm, introduces the topic, gives examples, explains the rules and gives exercise both oral and written. In view of these findings, the study recommended that secondary schools should organize Continuous Professional Development programs for teachers where the beliefs of teachers can be countered or reinforced for successful implementation of curricular.

Key words: Teacher, Teacher beliefs, English Language Grammar, Teaching

INTRODUCTION

Beliefs are important to consider for teacher educators and policy makers alike. If teachers are to make the much needed change and implement what the curriculum stipulates for effective teaching and even to receive new changes, their beliefs have to be considered.

The question that arises therefore is, what are beliefs? Beliefs are not easy to define because they are not directly observable. They are called different names by different scholars such as “implicit theories”, “conceptions”, “perceptions”, “rules of practice” “personal theories”, “personal pedagogical systems”, “judgements”, “untested assumptions”, “perceptions”, “pedagogical principles”, “theories for practice”, “images” and so on (Mohamed, 2006, Pajares, 1992:309).

Kagan (1992:65) defines teacher beliefs as ‘Unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and the academic material to be taught.’ Beliefs are also a set of strong feelings and attitudes of teachers about things that can affect the teaching-learning interaction. The beliefs of teachers will have a direct implication on the teaching-learning transaction (www.igi-global.com)

When it comes to grammar teaching there are varied issues that rise and these form the basis of the teachers’ beliefs. Some of the issues raised by researchers and teachers alike include whether grammar should be taught or should teachers simply create the conditions by which learners will learn naturally? What grammar should be taught and when should it be taught? Is there any value in teaching grammar explicitly? These are all questions rising from second language acquisition theories (Ellis, 2006). However, teachers based on their experiences as learners, student teachers and in service teachers also have their own in-built beliefs that may contradict with second language learning theories. Also, it is important to note as Zephir (2000) argues that teachers’ beliefs are not always inspired and developed by research studies but by personal experience. The incorporation of grammar

and the omission of it doesn't depend on second language acquisition theories but depends on teachers' beliefs and knowledge regarding learners' abilities, intellectual and affectual needs of learners as well as classroom management and their own self perception of their knowledge (Borg, 2001, 2003).

These beliefs will inevitably influence the way teachers teach in class. Actually, studies have shown that beliefs are predictors of a teacher's behavior in a classroom and a reflection of what a teacher provides in a classroom (Morina, 2016). Studies also indicate that teacher beliefs can sometimes be resistant to change because they are established early on in life (Borg, 2003, Morina, 2016). Therefore, for professional development programs that seek to bring about change in the curriculum and teaching approaches to be successful, teacher beliefs will play a major role. Continuous Professional Development programs need to encompass ways of leading teachers to alter their beliefs and practices in order to improve their art and craft.

However, tensions exist between teachers' individual perceived needs for self-improvement and the demands made on them from higher authorities, requiring changes in curriculum and teaching approaches. This is because just considering teachers' behaviour devoid of their beliefs may and will lead to failed attempts. For instance, the senior secondary English language syllabus recommends that teachers use the communicative approach in teaching the language even grammar but the use or the neglect of this approach and its techniques will depend on what teachers believe about how language and even grammar should be taught. It is from the foregoing discussions that this study endeavored to investigate teacher beliefs on how grammar should be taught among teachers of Luanshya District on the Copperbelt Province of Zambia.

Statement of The Problem

The knowledge gap that this study endeavored to fill was teacher beliefs on how English Language grammar should be taught in selected secondary schools of Luanshya District on the Copperbelt Province of Zambia.

Research Objective

The objective of this study was to analyse the beliefs of teachers on how English Language grammar should be taught in selected secondary schools of Luanshya District on the Copperbelt Province of Zambia.

Research Question

What are teacher beliefs on how English Language grammar should be taught in selected secondary schools of Luanshya District on the Copperbelt Province of Zambia?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

Tromp and Kombo (2009) defined research design as the blueprint through which research is conceived and executed. This study engaged the qualitative descriptive research design as it sought to investigate the beliefs of teachers with regards to English Language grammar teaching. The target population was all the teachers and learners of English Language and all the secondary schools of Luanshya District of the Copperbelt Province. The sample size was Twelve (12).

Methods of Data Collection

Data was collected using interviews. The research instruments used were interview guides and a voice recorder. These instruments were used to collect data regarding the beliefs of teachers concerning English Language grammar teaching.

Data Analysis

Being a purely qualitative study, data was analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis. Similar themes were grouped together to form patterns which were then code and interpreted with regards to teachers beliefs about how English Language grammar was to be taught.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Beliefs of Teachers on how English Language Grammar should be taught

The following review examined studies that focused on the beliefs of teachers on how English Language grammar should be taught.

Deng and Lin (2016) in a comparative study of grammar teaching beliefs between teachers and students found that the teachers' beliefs were inclined towards communicative teaching while students' beliefs were characteristic of an integration of both communicative and traditional grammar teaching. They also concluded that the teaching behaviors of the teachers under study were basically in tandem with their teaching beliefs. This was seen in the fact that the beliefs they professed were depicted in their lessons. The current study sought to find out the characteristics of the teachers beliefs in the teaching of grammar in Luanshya district, especially that there was no study of that nature. Considering that the above researchers found that teachers practiced their professed beliefs in their classrooms, this study sought to establish whether English language teachers of Luanshya district also practiced the beliefs they professed. This is because it is not unusual for teachers to profess one thing and do another in their lessons.

However, Farrell (2005) in as much as he echoes the fact that teachers do indeed have a set of complex belief systems, he also found that sometimes these beliefs are not reflected in their classroom practices for various complicated reasons. Some reasons were directly linked to the context of teaching itself. It is for this reason that this study was undertaken to assess the contextual factors that may have led teachers not to enact the beliefs that they professed in their lessons.

Morina (2016) in a survey of 48 EFL teachers in Kosovo Russia discovered that teachers believed that grammar should be taught systematically and explicitly. However, it was not known whether English language teachers in Zambia believed in teaching grammar inductively or deductively. Therefore, this study desired to establish the grammar teaching beliefs that language teachers in Luanshya District held.

Graus and Coppen (2016) did a study on the beliefs of student teachers enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate education programs. They found that respondents preferred form focused explicit and inductive instruction. However, senior undergraduates and post graduates were inclined towards meaning focused and implicit instruction. It is clear from the review that the higher the teachers went in educational attainment, the more they preferred meaning focused and implicit instruction. However, it was not known what form of instruction teachers of language in Zambia preferred or whether advancement in education led to any change in their preference of instruction. It is for this reason that the current study examined the beliefs of language teachers in Luanshya District on the way grammar should be taught.

Eisenstein-Ebbsworth and Schweers (1996) did a comparative study of teachers' attitudes about explicit instruction of grammar between teachers in Puerto Rico and New York. They found that, although all of the university ESL teachers they studied thought grammar should be taught, the New York- based ones were significantly less in favour of conscious grammar instruction than their Puerto Rico counterparts. The researchers attributed this phenomenon to the more traditional approach to language teaching usually adopted in Puerto Rico. As one of their informant stated, grammar learning had been such an important part of their learning experience, that they did not see any reason to abandon it. The researchers concluded that awareness of research plays a minimum role in determining second language teachers' approaches to use in grammar teaching. From the study under review we can see that the Puerto Rican teachers thought that grammar should be taught while the New York teachers thought that grammar should not be taught. Therefore, the current study endeavored to find out whether teachers in Zambia saw any value in conscious grammar instruction and also determined the role that second language acquisition research played in determining the approaches they used in grammar instruction.

In Zambia, Mwanza (2016) did a study to establish teachers' understanding and application of the eclectic approach to English grammar teaching. From a sample of 90 teachers and 18 lecturers that participated in this study, he found out that teachers believed that language was rule governed. Therefore, grammar teaching was form focused, explicit and rule explanation was predominant in English grammar lessons. However, this study

did not address the factors that led the teachers to teach form focused, explicit and rule dominated grammar lessons. Therefore, the current study researched from a cognitive point of view the factors that led teachers in Zambia to teach form focused grammar lessons. Also, the study examined the teachers' experiences to ascertain where the grammar teaching beliefs were emanating from.

As can be seen from the literature reviewed, data collected across the board was not consistent concerning teachers' beliefs because beliefs are affected by different sociocultural variables. In the literature reviewed, it was discovered that some of the beliefs that the teachers professed were not reflected in their teaching because of various contextual factors. It was discovered in the literature review that native speaker teachers were more in favor of implicit instruction than non-native speaker teachers. Also the higher the qualification the teachers had the more in favor they were of implicit instruction. It was for this reason the current study was undertaken in Zambia's Luanshya district to establish the beliefs of teachers regarding the teaching of grammar in the Zambian sociocultural context. This was due to the fact that there were no previous studies that had investigated teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in secondary schools in Zambia. There was need to establish the type of instruction the teachers of Luanshya district preferred and what sort of contextual factors they faced in their implementation of their teaching practices. This study also sought to ascertain whether there was any change in beliefs of those teachers who had furthered their education during the course of their teaching careers.

Presentation Of Findings

What are the Teachers' Beliefs on how English Language Grammar should be Taught?

The objective of this study was to analyse teachers' beliefs about how grammar should be taught. To answer this research question, the researcher used face to face interviews. Questions were asked in the interviews in order to seek the teachers' beliefs about how English Language grammar should be taught.

Teachers' Beliefs on How English as Second Language Grammar Should Be Taught: Interview Data

Firstly, the respondents were asked to describe a typical lesson involving grammar and the majority of the teachers described a similar progression for grammar lessons where the teacher begins the lesson with a situation or brainstorm, introduces the topic, gives examples, explains the rules and gives exercise both oral and written. Here are some examples from some of the teachers' responses:

T1:

- *I do not say the topic of the lesson but I give them a situation. From the situation I elicit sentences from the learners in which the grammar item I want to teach is. For instance, what is it that you are doing right now. They give a sentence like 'we are learning'*
- *Then after I state the structure they are going to learn and briefly explain the rule. Just explain to them that what they are doing is this.*
- *Then I usually divide the class into groups, they like it and I also like it and give them specific instructions based on the rule they've been taught.*
- *After the discussion the learners present their answers to the class in order to cultivate their confidence in speaking English.*
- *Lastly, they write individual exercise*

T 5:

- *Use a real situation- even using something that occurs right there and then.*
- *Introduce the topic of the day*

- *State the rules and use*
- *Ask the learners to do oral practice so they can create own situations and form own sentences.*
- *State and clear the changes that occur.*
- *I tell them “ichisungu bali pwisha ukupanga” you can’t form your own rules.*
- *Written exercise and go around marking.*

T3:

- *A typical lesson would begin with the teacher writing sentences on the board that have the grammatical structure to be learnt. From the sentences the teacher defines grammatical terms in question.*
- *The teacher then asks if there are any learners who can orally construct some sentences using the same grammatical structure.*
- *Then the teacher explains the rules of that grammatical structure.*
- *Teacher asks learners to further construct more sentences orally using the same structure.*
- *Then the teacher will give rewrites for written practice. “Rewrites help me to see how far they can demonstrate their understanding of the grammatical structure.”*

T 11

- *I tell a story*
- *Write on the board the topic.*
- *Introduce the rules*
- *Give examples, learners come to the board to write their own examples.*
- *Find questions from the prescribed books write on the board and let them write in their books and then mark.*

After they had described a typical lesson involving grammar, the researcher went further to ask for their views regarding error correction. From the responses recorded, there was a consensus among teachers that oral errors must be corrected immediately and often because of the need for learners to be corrected when using the language. The teachers explained that it was their duty to correct the errors because learners came to school to learn. Here are some of the responses:

T1: *I correct them because they won’t learn if I ignore, it is me to correct as it is my duty. Other teachers even use local languages, so they just have me.*

T5: *I correct right there and then and talk about their errors. It’s an uphill battle to correct oral grammar- I’ll be shooting down mistakes every day.*

T6: *I correct oral errors myself and written through marking...because they are here to learn, they need to have the correct knowledge.*

Actually T3 felt that language learning was habit formation so the learners had to be corrected immediately and often. Here is what he had to say:

T3: *I use learners to correct each other but in cases of mispronunciation I correct them myself there and then because language learning is habit formation.*

The teachers were asked to state which grammar teaching techniques they used most of the time. Teacher exposition, question and answer, group discussions and drills were among the commonly cited grammar teaching techniques the teachers used. Here are some of the responses;

T6: *Teacher exposition, I enjoy using pair work and also group discussions depending on the topic.*

T7: *Usually class discussion, question and answer, sometimes I use group work, though it consumes a lot of time, teacher exposition to explain the rules.*

T8: *two methods, question and answer and teacher exposition*

T9: *Question and answer and discussion.*

T10: *Teacher exposition, question and answer, question, pose and nominate, group work, class demonstrations*

T11: *Group work and discussions, drills and strict use of English.*

Based on the findings most teachers believed that grammar should be taught following a certain order. They also explained that learners' errors needed to be corrected immediately and not ignored. Also, the most cited grammar teaching practices of the teachers included; teacher exposition, question and answer, group discussions and drills

DISCUSSIONS OF THE FINDINGS

The study sought to analyse the teachers' beliefs about how grammar should be taught and this was done through the use of interviews and lesson observations. The results showed that the teachers believed that grammar should be taught explicitly using deductive techniques as can be seen in their responses. The respondents described a similar progression of a grammar lesson where the teacher begins the lesson with a situation or brainstorm, introduces the topic, gives examples, explains the rules and gives exercise both oral and written. The findings of this study conform to the findings of Morina (2016) and Graus and Coppen (2016) who found that teachers believed that grammar should be form-focused and taught systematically and explicitly and not implicitly. The findings of this study also concur with the findings of Mwanza (2016) who discovered that in the central province of Zambia, English Language grammar teaching was focused on form, explicit and rule explanation was predominant.

From the foregoing findings, it can be established that teachers valued explicit grammar instruction over implicit grammar instruction. For instance, in the interviews all the teachers indicated that the grammatical rules were important for learners to know. There responses to was also noted that all the teachers worked towards raising the awareness of their learners to English grammatical rules and structures. Rule explanation and application was at the center of all the grammar lessons. This study agrees with Eisenstein-Ebbsworth and Schweers (1996) assumption that his Puerto Rican participants' were more in favour of conscious grammar instruction because of the traditional approach adopted in Puerto Rico. The same is the case for the respondents in this study.

Furthermore, from their responses, it was discovered that the teachers' beliefs about how grammar should be taught were a fusion of contradictory language learning theories. The researcher found that the teachers were predominantly preoccupied with grammatical rules, a high regard for accuracy and the use of deductive techniques which showed the influence of the cognitive code approach. However, the teachers also seemed to have a noteworthy influence of behaviourism as noted in their explanations of the use of pattern practice and the use of tables to practice grammatical rules. Some teachers actually in their own words indicated that they were trying to cement good habits in their learners. For example, the teachers explained the grammatical rules to the learners which is a cognitive approach but they also used tables and pattern drills to practice grammar. This shows that the teacher beliefs of grammar were not refined because they were practicing behaviourism and cognitivism in the same lesson. Therefore, this study concludes that the teachers beliefs in the teaching of English

grammar was marred by conflicting sets of knowledge and this was reflected in their explanations of classroom practices.

The results of this study also found that teachers valued error correction and they believed that grammatical errors must be corrected immediately whether they interfered with comprehensibility or not. All the teachers indicated that error correction was important and they practiced this belief during their lessons either by correcting the learners themselves or by using their peers. The error correction techniques of the teachers were not implicit as the communicative approach would have it through means such as clarification requests, confirmation checks, and recasts (Larsen-Freeman, 2009) but the teachers would ask the class to state whether what was said was correct or not and sometimes they would just outrightly say no. The teachers indicated that they corrected errors because oral errors had a tendency of being transferred to written work. They also stated that they were trying to form correct habits in the learners. The majority of the respondents felt it was their duty to correct errors because learners came to school to learn. This was in accordance with the findings of Thu (2009) and Basturmken, et al (2004) who indicated that teachers in their studies corrected errors whether they interfered with comprehensibility or not. However, this is contrary to Krashen's (1985) view that errors should not be corrected if they do not interfere with comprehensibility because he claimed error correction might hinder second language development in such a way that it strikes the learners' confidence and stirs up the affective filter. Krashen suggests that error correction has no real effect in language acquisition but it does in conscious language learning as it encourages the learners to rethink the rules (Dubois, 2018). Nonetheless, error correction need not to be done instantly as the teachers in this study did. The learners need to be encouraged to engage in meaning making conversations especially if the errors don't interfere with comprehensibility. However, the teachers' understanding is that language is rule governed which influenced their belief that the flouting of rules needs to be corrected immediately. Therefore, it was simply a reproduction of their cognition. This is because the beliefs of teachers will have a direct implication on the teaching-learning transaction. They predict the teacher's behaviour in a classroom and reflect what a teacher provides in a classroom (Morina, 2016). The teachers indicated that error correction was paramount in the grammar teaching process and their corrective practices consequently reflected it.

The study also found that the teachers strongly believed that metalanguage should be used for learners of all proficiency levels from grade eight to grade twelve. Ellis (2008) stated that when teachers decide to use metalanguage, they are treating language as an object rather than utilizing it as a tool for communication. It was noted in explanations that during grammar teaching the teachers applied grammatical terminologies. For instance, from the oral lesson descriptions presented one can see the use of terms such as conditional, infinitive, determiner, verb, future simple tense and so on to describe language. The teachers used the terms freely and expected that the learners already knew them. However, there is debate in language teaching regarding the use of grammatical terms when teaching grammar because the use of grammatical terms is associated with the grammar translation method and methods after it want to avoid it. Furthermore, the use of grammatical terms is a characteristic of explicit grammar teaching and is only beneficial in helping learners formulate the rules that they will need to be able to easily understand language (Berman, 1979). It is discouraged in communicative language teaching. The following are some of the reasons that Borg (1999) posits as the disadvantages of using grammatical terminologies and the reasons why it is discouraged in communicative language teaching. The use of grammatical terms or metalanguage causes the teaching of language in abstraction and adds to the complexity of second language learning because it allows learners to talk about language rather than communicate. Whether a teacher will use metalanguage when teaching grammar or not depends on his/her beliefs concerning it. The teachers in this study used the terms knowing that their learners already knew them and they expected their learners to be able to define them. Research suggest (Myhill et al, 2013) that metalinguistic knowledge is an area of challenge for many teachers but this study found out that the teachers in Luanshya district were very conversant with the grammatical terminologies and used them liberally with their learners.

The teachers practiced the beliefs they professed in the interview. This finding was in tandem with the findings of Deng and Lin (2016) who concluded that the teaching behaviours of the teachers in their study were synchronised with their teaching beliefs. From the findings it was established that the beliefs of the teachers in the present study favoured the cognitive code approach and the grammar translation way of teaching grammar as it was noted in their responses that they valued systematic, explicit and deductive grammar instruction. This

is because what the teachers know and understand grammar to be influences their beliefs about how grammar should be taught and it consequently reflects in their classroom practices. This is just to show that teacher beliefs are a complex dynamic system where understanding will influence beliefs and beliefs will influence classroom practices because there's internal connectivity within the mind of a teacher.

However, in this study, the beliefs of teachers contravened the syllabus stipulation that they teach the English language using the communicative approach. This is because the communicative approach gives superiority to an inductive approach to grammatical rules and generalizations. They also contravened the communicative approach in the sense that they mostly taught grammar at a sentential level without any context. They did not involve meaningful communication nor did they use authentic situations and materials which are some of the tenets of communicative teaching (Manchishi, 2017). What this means is that teachers will not just follow syllabus stipulations just because they have been outlined but they will practice what they believe in. The teachers in this study believed grammar to be transformational generative grammar and there was no way of them to applying a functionalist approach to grammar teaching.

CONCLUSION

To this end, findings in this study had indicated that the teachers believed that English Language grammar should be taught explicitly using deductive techniques as attested by their responses. Furthermore, emphasis was on production of error free structures. The respondents again described a similar progression of a grammar lesson where the teacher begins the lesson with a situation or brainstorm, introduces the topic, gives examples, explains the rules and gives exercise both oral and written. In view of these findings, the study recommended that secondary schools should organize Continuous Professional Development programs for teachers where the beliefs of teachers can be countered or reinforced for successful implementation of curricular.

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