Conceptions of Grammar Teaching : A case study of Teachers' Beliefs and Classroom Practices

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study that investigated and compared the beliefs and actual classroom practices of two experienced English language teachers with regards to grammar teaching in a primary school in Singapore. Areas where practices converged with or diverged from beliefs about grammar teaching are examined and discussed as well as the factors that have influenced the teachers' actual classroom practices. The findings suggest that teachers do indeed have a set of complex belief systems that are sometimes not reflected in their classroom practices for various complicated reasons, some directly related to context of teaching.

Introduction

There is now agreement in general education studies that teaching is a cognitive activity and that teachers' beliefs greatly impact their instructional decisions in the classroom (e.g., Shavelson, & Stern, 1981; Tillema, 2000). Within second language education, teaching is also now viewed as a complex cognitive activity (Borg, 2003). As Borg (2003) suggests, "teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs" (p, 81). Indeed, research has indicated that teachers possess a vast array of complex beliefs about pedagogical issues including

beliefs about students and classroom practices (Berliner, 1987; Borg, 1998, 2003; Burns, 1992; Shavelson & Stern, 1981). These beliefs are said to form a structured set of principles and are derived from a teacher's prior experiences, school practices, and a teacher's individual personality (Borg, 2003). Furthermore, and as noted by Shavelson and Stern (1981), what teachers do in the classroom is said to be governed by what they believe and these beliefs often serve to act as a filter through which instructional judgments and decisions are made. Within TESOL there has been a growing realization of a need to understand, and account for, the underlying belief systems of language teachers and the impact these have on their classroom practices (e.g., Borg 1998, 2003; Farrell 1999; Golombek, 1998). Although previous studies have investigated teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in secondary schools in Singapore (e.g., Ng & Farrell, 2003), to our knowledge no research has been carried out specifically on the impact of teachers' beliefs and practices in Singapore's primary schools. The purpose of this paper is to explore the beliefs and actual classroom practices of two experienced English language teachers with regards to grammar teaching in a primary school in Singapore. Areas where practices converged with or diverged from beliefs related to the teaching of English grammar are examined and discussed as well as other factors that may have influenced the teachers' actual classroom practices. For the purposes of this study we use Eisenhart et al's. (1988) definition of a belief as: "An attitude consistently applied to an activity" (p.54). They suggest that beliefs, by affecting the way in which we perceive reality, guide both our thoughts and our behaviors. The paper starts with a brief discussion of teacher beliefs and the teaching of grammar followed by an outline of the case study. Next, an analysis of the convergence or divergence of the teacher's beliefs and actual classroom practices is presented and discussed.

Teacher Beliefs

Johnson (1994), working within the field of TESOL, has suggested that teacher beliefs are neither easy to define nor study because they are not directly observable. What we do know is that teacher beliefs consist of tacitly held assumptions and perceptions about teaching and learning (Kagan, 1992), that they are generally stable and that they reflect the nature of the instruction the teacher provides to students (Hampton, 1994). According to Johnson (1994) educational research on teachers' beliefs share three basic assumptions: (1) Teachers' beliefs influence perception and judgment. (2) Teachers' beliefs play a role in how information on teaching is translated into classroom practices. (3) Understanding teachers' beliefs is essential to improving teaching practices and teacher education programs (p. 439). In the area of language teaching, teacher beliefs have been examined to see how personal beliefs and knowledge of the pedagogical systems of teaching have informed the instructional practices and decisions of teachers of English as a second language (e.g., Borg, 2003; Burns, 1992; Golombek, 1998). In addition, the study of teacher beliefs, as Richards, Gallo, and Renandya (2001) have pointed out, "forms part of the process of understanding how teachers conceptualize their work" (p. 42).

In the Asia-Pacific region (the context of the case study presented in this paper), there have been a number of studies on teacher beliefs and grammar teaching (e.g., Farrell, 1999; Ng & Farrell, 2003; Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001; Yim, 1993). Studies by both Ng & Farrell, (2003) and Yim (1993) investigated the extent to which teachers' theoretical beliefs influenced their classroom practices, and found evidence to suggest that what teachers say and do in the classroom are governed by their beliefs. Farrell (1999) examined the belief system of pre-service teachers of English grammar in terms of its influence on teaching practice, and found evidence to suggest that these beliefs may be resistant to change. Similarly, Richards, Gallo, and Renandya (2001) discovered (from administering a self-report questionnaire to participants in an in-service course) that although many stated they followed a communicative approach to teaching, "many of the respondents still hold firmly to the belief that grammar is central to language learning and direct grammar teaching is needed by their EFL/ESL students" (p. 54). Despite the increased levels of interest in the area of language teachers' beliefs, there have not been many case study investigations that have focused on the beliefs of experienced language teachers (especially in the context of the case study reported in this paper). We think this particular type of study vitally important especially in light of the results of the recent Richards, Gallo, and Renandya (2001) survey that suggest evidence of divergence between teachers' stated beliefs and actual classroom practices related to grammar teaching. The case study presented in this paper is one attempt to add to the literature on this important topic.

Methodology

The case study of the beliefs of two experienced primary school teachers and their actual instructional practices in grammar teaching attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the two teachers' beliefs about the way grammar should be taught in primary school?
2. What are their actual classroom practices of teaching grammar?

In addition, we wanted to check how the beliefs correspond to the observed classroom practices. Also, any other determining factors that may have influenced these two teachers' approach to grammar teaching in primary school were noted. The two teachers Velma and Daphne (both pseudonyms), although different in age and areas of specialisation, are both experienced English language teachers. Velma has been teaching for 24 years and Daphne for 10 years.

Data Collection

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to investigate the relationship between beliefs and actual classroom practices with regards to grammar teaching (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Data collection occurred over a period of two months. Sources

of data included one scheduled pre-study interview with each of the two teachers, two non-participatory observations of the teachers' classes with pre-lesson and post-lesson interviews, as well as a collection of random samples of their students' written work. The initial interview questions were piloted with the help of two different teachers not involved in the actual study and the questions were further refined as a result of this process. The interview questions were designed to elicit information about the teachers' beliefs regarding grammar and grammar teaching, and about different approaches to grammar teaching, including grammar corrections. Other questions were aimed at obtaining information about the teachers' actual teaching practices as well as factors that influenced their choice of approaches and strategies.

The interviews were the primary research tool used to obtain information about teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching. Based on the three-interview series structure (Seidman, 1998), three interviews, each lasting one hour, were scheduled with each teacher: a pre-study interview to establish the context of each teacher's experience, a pre-lesson interview to obtain information about the lesson to be implemented and a post-lesson interview to help the teachers reflect on the meaning the whole experience held for them. All the interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed in full and coded.

Two classroom non-participatory observations (McDonough & McDonough, 1997) were carried out over a period of two months with each teacher, to obtain information about their actual teaching practices. We had hoped for more classroom observations but circumstances beyond our control prevented further classroom observations. Specific episodes of events observed during the lessons and the accompanying observer's field notes were used to generate discussion topics during post-lesson interviews. The audio-recordings of the lesson observations were also transcribed, as were the accompanying observer's field notes. Lesson plans as well as instructional materials and exercises were also collected. In addition, random samples of students' marked composition scripts were collected and analyzed for information about the ways the teachers approached grammar errors. These samples of students' written work were triangulated (Miles & Huberman, 1994) with data obtained through the interviews and the lesson observations.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis involved a cyclical process, and the analysis of data already collected aided in the successive stages of data collection. Findings from all the varied sources were validated through a triangulation process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, data from the individual teacher's interview, classroom observations and the analysis of students' composition scripts were matched for convergence and divergence between beliefs and practices. Further surveys of the interview data were focused on the discovery of salient themes and patterns using inductive analysis procedures (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Results

Beliefs

Table 1 outlines the two teachers' beliefs about issues of grammar and grammar teaching as articulated during the interviews.

Table 1: Teachers' Belief Statements

	Teachers' Stated Beliefs	Daphne	Velma
1.	Grammar is important and has to be taught	o	o
2.	Students need to know the grammar rules and how to apply them in their writing	o	o
3.	Drilling is a useful tool in grammar teaching.	o	o
4.	Grammar is concerned with using the correct tenses.	o	*
5.	Grammar involves teaching language structures.	o	o
6.	There is a place for deliberate (overt) teaching of grammar,for the effective teaching of language items.	o	*
7.	There is a place for incidental (covert) teaching to enable students to acquire language skills.	x	o
8.	The approaches to grammar teaching depend largely on the students' proficiency level in the English language.	o	o
KEY: o =Agrees x= Does not agree *=Not stated + =Both approaches			

According to the information outlined in table 1, both teachers agree that the teaching of grammar is crucial in order to enable students to use grammar structures correctly in

written work. In fact, Velma said that the only time when she might not teach grammar overtly was when her students already possessed the knowledge and the ability to use the grammar item in speech, writing and listening comprehension. Although both teachers said that students may not need to be able to explain grammar rules explicitly, they agreed that if they have the ability to apply these rules and structures correctly in sentences, it would translate into fewer grammatical errors in their speech and in writing. Furthermore, Daphne said that she would not hesitate to directly re-teach a grammar structure if she discovered that her students had not fully understood the structure and were not able to use it correctly in speech and writing.

In addition, both teachers strongly believe in providing grammar drills for their students. For example, Daphne remarked that her belief in using grammar drills originated from her own experience as a student because she said she realized that she had benefited from these drills by her English teacher. Daphne continued, "I am probably of the old school. I was brought up on this sort of teaching and I see the good that it has produced, for me, my sister, and the friends around me." When asked what grammar meant to her as a teacher, her first reaction was that grammar was about the teaching of tenses, the structural formation of sentences. She commented: "The first thing that comes to mind is using the correct tenses at the correct time--past tense, present tense and also how to form sentences. To me, it's more of the structure." When asked what grammar meant to her as a teacher, Velma replied that grammar consists of structures that help to make sentences meaningful. She remarked,

Grammar is like breaking up English into parts. To me it's like a puzzle, how sentences get joined together, what are the components needed to be able to communicate a meaning in the form of a sentence.

Velma also expressed her support of drills in the patterns of grammar usage because drilling would enable students to "isolate and identify grammar mistakes in their writing."

For incidental teaching of grammar (covert teaching of grammar where items are presented as part of another language activity such as reading, writing, listening or speaking), Velma believes that there is a place in the language classroom for incidental teaching, while Daphne has her doubts about the approach. Daphne's main concern about the incidental teaching of grammar is that students without the necessary language skills may not be able to benefit from such an indirect approach. She remarked:

If you're doing something, like maybe a passage, and then you see this sort of grammar and then you tell them Éthis is the type of grammar you use ÉWith this incidental (teaching)--it's here and there you introduce this and introduce that. It's such a mix.

Daphne expressed a distinct preference for explicit teaching of grammar rules and sentence structures, and the utilization of drills and tables. She said she also supports

the deliberate teaching of pre-determined grammar items. In contrast, she voiced a marked reservation about the incidental and deductive teaching of grammar. Velma, on the other hand, expressed equal preference for the traditional approach to grammar teaching with the explicit teaching of grammar rules and sentence structures as well as the utilization of drills, and for the communicative and inductive approaches.

Classroom Practices

Table 2 outlines the two teachers' actual classroom practices when teaching English grammar.

Table 2: Teachers' Classroom Practices when Teaching Grammar

	Observed Classroom Practices	Daphne		Velma	
		D1	D2	V1	V2
1.	Lessons followed a mainly traditional approach, with explicit teaching of grammar rules and meanings.	o	o	o	o
2.	Lessons were primarily teacher-centred, where teacher engaged in giving instructions, providing explanation and eliciting responses.	o	o	o	o
3.	There was noticeable use of grammar terminology by teachers and students	o	o	o	o
4.	Lessons consisted of some form of communicative activities, either as an introduction at the start of the lesson or as a practice during lesson.	#	o	o	#
5.	Lessons were integrated into other activities like speaking and writing.	#	o	o	#
6.	Teachers corrected all grammar errors in sampled compositions.	o		o	
7.	Teachers annotated grammar	x		x	

	errors with relevant symbols.	˄	˄

KEY:
D1: Daphne's Lesson D1--Present and Past Tense Forms
D2: Daphne's Lesson D2--Asking Questions Using 'When'
V1: Velma's Lesson V1--Adverbs of Manner
V2: Velma's Lesson V2--Regular and Irregular Verbs
o = Observed   #= Limited occurrence x= Not observed

As table 2 indicates, both Daphne and Velma adopted somewhat of a traditional approach to grammar teaching. The observed lessons were mainly teacher-centred, with both teachers providing explanations and instructions, and asking questions and eliciting responses from the students on their knowledge of grammar items. For example, Daphne's lessons, especially her first lesson (D1), were mainly worksheet-based. Little integration of grammar into speaking and writing activities was observed. Although Velma's first lesson (V1) attempted to integrate grammar into speaking and writing activities such as composing poetry and reading short passages, her second lesson (V2), however, was a deductive, overt grammar class on the distinction between regular and irregular verbs, and these further reinforced and the students' knowledge tested at the end of class by fill-in-the-blank worksheets. In this second lesson Velma required her students to complete two worksheets, one on regular verbs and another on irregular verbs, at the end of the lesson as evidence of their levels of understanding the lesson. In addition, during the classes that were observed, both Daphne and Velma used the metalanguage of grammar to explain grammar items. For example, Daphne used sentences such as: "singular noun must have a singular verb," and Velma made reference to terms such as "regular verbs" and "irregular verbs." Another similarity between the two teachers' classroom practices is the manner in which both provided feedback on their students' compositions. For example, the teachers marked each grammar error made their students in the compositions and the correct version was then written above the error.

Beliefs and Classroom Practices

We suggest it important to note that when discussing these two teachers' beliefs, because we are discussing a cognitive process, their beliefs can only be inferred from discussions and observations of teaching behavior. However, we take the stance in this case study that it seems plausible to suggest that the teachers' beliefs are the best indicators of the type of instructional decisions they made during their teaching. As such we attempted to compare their stated beliefs with their actual classroom practices

to examine for evidence of convergence or divergence between the two. As Woods (1996) has pointed out teachers must be on guard against "claim allegiance to beliefs consistent with what they perceive as the current teaching paradigm rather than consistent with their unmonitored beliefs and their behaviour in class" (p. 71).

For Daphne, then we noted a strong sense of convergence between stated beliefs and actual classroom practices. Having herself experienced English language learning by explicit instruction on the rules of grammar; Daphne firmly believes that her students can also benefit from this overt approach to grammar teaching. Her actual classroom practices of providing explicit explanations and instructions on grammar items and structures were congruent with her belief in her "traditional approach to grammar teaching." It is interesting to note that Daphne's case appears to be in conflict with the Johnson's (1999) suggestion that many language teachers are adamant about not recreating the same type of formal language learning experiences they had when they were students. Not only was Daphne amenable to recreating her own learning experience, she was committed to it because of the benefits that she perceived the approach would hold for her students in the Singapore education system.

Velma's belief in a more indirect, or covert, approach to grammar teaching partially matched some her actual classroom practices. During the pre-study interview, Velma expressed the belief that grammar teaching should be integrated into speaking, writing and reading. In fact, this was observed during Velma's Lesson V1 on adverbs of manner, where students were actively discussing and writing poetry and short stories, rather than receiving explicit instruction on adverbs of manner. Even though it may seem that Velma's beliefs and practices converge, we noted some divergence also. For example, during Velma's Lesson V1 on adverbs of manner, she made explicit grammar explanations and the activities were not contextualized into meaningful communicative situations. In fact, her grammar teaching was not incidental but structured and prescriptive.

Discussion

There are a number of possible reasons for some of the divergences noted above between stated beliefs and actual classroom practices. Some of these include time factors, and teachers' reverence for traditional grammar instruction. For example, time is possibly one of the major external factors over which teachers have little or no control and that appears to affect the implementation of beliefs, especially in the context of the Singapore education system. Both Daphne and Velma constantly spoke about how their teaching was constrained by "time factors." They both suggested that many of their classroom instructional decisions, such as what approach to adopt for a grammar item or structure, were influenced not only by their beliefs but also by the time they perceived they would have to complete an activity as outlined in the syllabus. For example, Daphne said that she specifically preferred a deductive approach rather than an inductive approach to teaching grammar, "not because of a lack of confidence in the

effectiveness of the latter, but because I feel that the deductive approach is more straightforward" and therefore required less time for her to implement. They also noted that the demand on their time came not only from the syllabus demands and the school administration, but also from the parents. So in a sense, we can say that the school and the parents also influence the teachers' classroom practices.

Another significant reason why teachers, who may express enthusiasm for alternative methods of grammar instruction, but continue to employ the traditional approach to grammar teaching is the powerful emotions and attitudes attached to traditional grammar teaching and learning (Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001). For example, Richards, Gallo, and Renandya (2001) discovered that many of the respondents to their survey, although suggesting they prepared materials and activities to teach English language in a communicative way (deemphasize grammar instruction), they nevertheless reported that they still believe grammar is central to language learning and that "direct grammar teaching would result in more accurate language use" (p. 55). This was also the case with Velma in this case study as she continued to employ the traditional approach to grammar teaching in the lessons observed despite her stated preference for a communicative approach.

The two teachers reported on in this case study were not consciously aware of their beliefs about teaching and learning English grammar until directly asked by the interviewer. In addition, they were not consciously aware of their classroom practices concerning the teaching of grammar, so they had no way of comparing their beliefs and classroom practices. The purpose of this study was not to look at or for "best practices"; rather, we as researchers, wanted to act as a mirror for the two teachers so they could reflect on their work. Consequently, since language teachers' beliefs about successful teaching form the core of their teaching behavior (Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001), we suggest that opportunities be provided for teachers to reflect on their work (e.g., see Farrell, 2004a,b; Richards & Farrell, 2005) so that they can be encouraged to articulate and reflect on their beliefs while also investigating any discrepancies between their beliefs and classroom practices.

Conclusion

This exploratory case study investigated the stated beliefs and actual instructional practices of two experienced teachers of English language in a primary school in Singapore. The findings suggest that teachers do indeed have a set of complex belief systems that are sometimes not reflected in their classroom practices for various complicated reasons, some directly related to context of teaching. Even though generalizations of this case study may be problematic, language teachers may learn much about the importance of accessing teachers' beliefs and comparing these beliefs with actual classroom practices. We also hope that this case study can act as a catalyst in enabling other teachers to reflect on and examine their own beliefs about their grammar teaching practices.

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