THEORIES OF GRAMMAR AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON TEACHING PRACTICE: EXAMINING LANGUAGE TEACHER'S BELIEFS

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Chapter I: Introduction

Grammar is a vexed, if not controversial, area of language teaching and learning. Whether the debate is about how to teach grammar, how to integrate grammar into a communicative approach, whether to teach grammar at all, what sort of grammar to teach, or the effectiveness of explicit grammar teaching, there are unresolved debates about the place of grammar in language learning and in language teaching (e.g., R. Ellis, 2006; Thornbury, 1999). In recent decades, there has been considerable research on teachers' cognition, teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching and teachers' language awareness and the way these beliefs interact and influence grammar teaching (Andrews, 2003; Borg, 2003a). This paper contributes to the area of teacher beliefs by focusing on the theories of grammar that teachers find useful and apply in their language teaching.On the basis of current theory and experience, it has been pointed out that future language teachers need an understanding and knowledge of different types of grammar and will need to know how to apply it in different circumstances (Hughes & McCarthy,1998). Prospective language teachers need both grammatical knowledge and the skills" pedagogical content knowledge", to teach grammar (Andrews, 1997; Shulman, 1987). This paper contributes to the research on pedagogical content grammar knowledge by specifically examining the teachers' use of different theories in the teaching of grammar, on which there is little literature.

Chapter II. Development

1. Literature review

1.1. Definitions, theories of grammar and grammar teaching

There are many different definitions of grammar (R. Ellis, 2006; Purpura, 2004), which are influenced by a number of approaches to grammar teaching. The

following section will discuss the grammar theories that have been proposed and their contribution to our understanding of grammar. The discussion of each theory is often done in comparison with another theory (see Butt, Fahev, Feez, Spinks & Yallop, 2000; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Hughes & McCarthy, 1998). Butt et al. (2000) introduce and explain systemic functional grammar by contrasting it with traditional grammar. Hughes and McCarthy (1998) define discourse grammar in contrast to traditional grammar, but also in contrast to functional grammar. For example, they describe systemic functional grammar as "essentially a text-grammar, that is to say, the choices are examined in relation to how the finished product, the text, comes to be as a result of choices made from predetermined systems, whereas discourse grammars are more process-oriented and are interested in any individual interactional factor that may influence moment-bymoment choices in context" (p.264).There are also a number of articles which provide overviews of these theories of grammar, or grammatical paradigms, that have been influential in language teaching. Derewianka (2001), for example, provides an overview and brief history of traditional grammar, structural grammar, transformational generative grammar and functional grammar. As she points out, there are a number of functional grammars, but it is Michael Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) which she notes as being particularly influential in language teaching (p.256). In addition, she recommends an eclectic approach to the use of grammars in teaching..

1.2. Teacher beliefs and grammar training.

It is important to mention here the studies that have examined teachers' beliefs and attitudes to grammar and their knowledge in grammar teaching. One study which looked specifically at the approach to grammar that teachers took in the classroom was done by Horan (2003), who compared the influences of traditional grammar, systemic functional grammar and structural linguistics in grammar teaching. Her study employed questionnaires which she distributed to 24 schools in Sydney, Australia in 1998. The schools included mainly primary and secondary schools

and 3 intensive language schools. The findings revealed that (a) traditional grammar continues to hold an influential position in grammar teaching; (b) in teacher-training and in syllabus and teacher reference material, SFG is dominant; and (c) there is very minimal awareness of structural linguistics. Horan, through the use of certain questions, revealed that teachers with SFG background did not have a good knowledge of basic grammatical concepts such as verbs and nouns. Horan suggested that the overemphasis of SF grammar and traditional grammar in the teachers' training had produced a gap in teachers' knowledge which was sometimes inadequate in explaining grammatical concepts. This paper, together with the various TESOL programs' focus on systemic functional grammar, has been the starting point and inspiration for conducting this research. Given the dominance of SFG in teacher training and the gap in teachers' knowledge, we wanted to examine teachers' opinions about the importance of different theories and whether there are any particular theories that underpin their grammar practices. Horan's (2003) findings on lack of grammatical knowledge lend support to Borg's (2001) argument that teachers' knowledge about grammar, and beliefs about their knowledge, has implications - for their practice - in the classroom. Using a case-study approach, he found that ELT teachers' perceptions of their knowledge of grammar may influence (p.27):

• The extent to which they teach grammar; their willingness to engage in spontaneous grammar work;

• The manner in which they respond to students' questions about grammar;

• The extent to which they promote class discussion about grammar;

• The way they react when their explanations are questioned; and

• The nature of the grammatical information they provide to students.

This necessitates studies such as this one, which aims to look at teachers' use of theories in grammar teaching. Our study also discusses the relationship between grammar training and grammar teaching.Another study by Borg and Burns (2008) examined teachers' beliefs and practices about the integration of grammar and

skills teaching using respondents from 18 countries. The research pointed out that teachers disagreed with the idea of teaching grammar in isolation and reported high levels of integration of grammar and skills teaching. The study also revealed different ways in which teachers integrate grammar with skills. This included grammar in context, task-driven grammar work, grammar after skills work, and reactive focus on grammar. Finally, the teachers provided evidence of the effectiveness of grammar teaching practices which included an increase in learner participation; increase in student confidence and in student satisfaction.That lack of teachers' grammatical knowledge has also been highlighted as a problem by Brinton and Holten (2001), who examined the role of grammar teaching in content-based instruction. Brinton and Holten (2001) point to a lack of relevant training as one reason that teachers may not be successful in integrating grammar into a content-based instructional framework: "how to mine a content-area text for potential grammatical and lexico-grammatical items to teach; how to explain and practise structures within the rich context in which they were found; or how to achieve a proper balance between letting content or letting student error patterns drive the selection of grammar structures to be taught" (p.249).Clearly, not all teachers, or pre-service teachers, lack grammatical knowledge. As Horan (2003) noted, traditional grammar continues to hold an influential position in grammar teaching. For teacher trainers, the challenge is often to deal both with pre-service teachers with limited grammatical knowledge and to deal with those who come with a strong background in traditional grammar. Gordon and Harshbarger's (2003) study of their own TESOL program, discusses the need to both "help language teacher learners break away from the deeply ingrained habits of traditional pedagogical grammar thought and practice" while at the same time give them the grammar skills to develop the language skills of their language learners, as well as the linguistic knowledge to do both of these things (p.41). the importance of grammar teaching in an EAP context and investigated attitudes to implicit and explicit approaches to grammar teaching. Our study expands their

work by focusing on different theories of grammar underpinning these approaches to grammar teaching.Finally, Purpura (2004) argues that the two grammar definitions he discusses – both syntactocentric and communication based "have shaped how language teachers conceptualize grammar in their work" (p.20). He argues that teachers do not draw exclusively on any one theory but draw on both perspectives in their grammar teaching to meet the needs of their students (p.21). The "communication-based perspective" views grammar as a set of norms, preferences and expectations that are used to convey meaning (Purpura, 2004, p.16), and the "syntactocentric view of language" includes the metalanguage with which we talk about language. Our study also examines how and whether the teachers' use of theories reflects these two perspectives.

2. Discussion.

One of the central questions of the research project was to find out whether the participants' background in grammar theories affects their teaching techniques and strategies. This has been identified by Borg (2003b) as an important area of future research. The questionnaire results and interviews indicated that there is a relationship between the teachers' knowledge and their reported teaching practices. When comparing Figures 1 and 2, it can be observed that the participants' background has some similarities with the grammar theories they claim they employ in their teaching; the only minor difference was their increased use of SFG in their explanations, despite their lack of background training in it.However, although the SFG component was selected in Figure 2, it did not seem to be as prominent in the answers that related to the use of strategies in different grammatical phenomena, (see Figures 3,4, 5) although it still served an important role in their grammatical explanations. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is that answers that related to discourse grammar (and which some researchers might categorise as part of systemic functional grammar) seemed more important. This could also be a result of the chosen grammatical phenomena, which might not require understanding of systemic functional grammar. However, the teachers' use

of SFG and discourse grammar in the specific questions (Figures 3, 4, 5) suggest that they have probably learnt those approaches or techniques during their teaching experience, for example through the materials they use. This underlines the significance of grammar teaching experience which also contributes to gaining confidence with grammar teaching, as seen in the results of the question discussed in the previous section and suggests that grammatical development continues with teaching practice. The teachers' use of different theories in grammar teaching and the reasons for their confidence also suggest that an openness to approaches is significant in language teaching and can help teachers develop more techniques and approaches through teaching practice.The final aim of the project was to identify the teachers' beliefs about their use of theories in grammatical explanations. Although previous researchers have indicated the importance of various theories for grammar teaching, there has not been much research which has examined teachers' use of such theories in their grammar teaching (Borg & Burns, 2008). Through general and specific questions that asked participants to discuss their strategies in teaching grammatical aspects in the questionnaire this study has revealed that teachers employed knowledge from many theories, such as structural linguistics, traditional grammar, systemic functional grammar, and discourse approaches and did not employ one single theory or only the theory they were trained in. This result supports the suggestions of Liu and Master (2003) and Derewianka (2001) that "grammar teaching is not thus an enterprise onto itself but one rooted in linguistics, language teaching and education in general" (Liu & Master, 2003, p.3). This may suggest that openness to other approaches and an understanding of the use of different skills and theories need to be part of a TESOL curriculum to provide prospective language teachers with a more adequate preparation for ESL/EFL grammar teaching. This research also supported previous researchers' proposals that certain grammar theories are more appropriate for teaching different grammatical aspects. For example, the discourse approach to grammar more adequately explains issues such as ellipsis, cohesion, reference,

topic fronting, tense-function correlations while the value of traditional grammar is in discussing the form of tenses and subject verb agreement (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; Hughes & McCarthy, 1998). More research is required in this area to improve teachers' knowledge and use of different theories in teaching grammatical phenomena. It should also be mentioned that the approaches and techniques used by the teachers in explaining grammar are based on the two views of grammar which have been proposed by Purpura (2004), the communication-based perspective, and syntactocentric view of language. The first view of grammar is reflected in the answers that relate to discourse grammar, semantics and systemic functional grammar and the latter is seen in answers that are based on traditional grammar and syntax. Both these views influence and drive the grammar approaches that teachers draw on to explain grammar.

Charpter III. Conclusion

The paper has discussed English teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching and their reported employment of grammar theories in language teaching. The teachers are in agreement with current research studies which point to the fact that more than one approach is required in grammar teaching and that knowledge of syntax and morphology, semantics and pragmatics as well as functional grammar offer different perspectives for the explanation of grammatical phenomena. Moreover, the teaching of linguistics is important in the teaching of grammar, because it contributes to teachers' understanding of grammar (see Horan, 2003). It was also suggested that different grammatical phenomena can be explained using different grammatical theories, and that focusing on one particular type of grammar does not prepare teachers adequately for language teaching Borg and Burns (2008) emphasize that teachers' mental lives offer an important path for understanding L2 grammar teaching. They are also found to influence teachers' practices, hence an understanding of teachers' conceptions is necessary and may have implications for designing grammar and methodology courses in the TESOL curriculum. Based on the findings of this research, the TESOL grammar courses could benefit from:

incorporating a good understanding of different theories of grammar;

nurturing a multiperspective approach to grammar; and

focusing on explaining how different approaches contribute to our understanding of grammatical phenomena.