

An Investigation of Iranian EFL Teachers' Beliefs about Grammar

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Abstract: Teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning influence classroom actions and students' performance. Recently, teacher cognition has received attention in the field of language pedagogy. Social and institutional factors can affect teachers' cognition. This study tries to investigate how variables such as teachers' experience, gender, and work environment can affect beliefs about grammar and its teaching. 40 Iranian English as Foreign Language teachers (20 from public setting, and 20 from private setting) with different gender and work experience were chosen. A questionnaire designed by the researcher and an open-ended question consisting of three parts were distributed amongst the participants. Our analyses indicate that teachers' experience, gender, and work environment can significantly affect their beliefs about grammar. The pedagogical implications are discussed.

Key words: teacher cognition, social and institutional factors, public setting, private setting

1. Introduction

Newly, instruction of grammar has retrieved its prominence in language pedagogy (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004). Scholars in the field of language teaching have identified grammar as an essential issue without the knowledge of which the efforts of language learners and teachers are in vain (Batstone & Ellis, 2009). It goes without saying that grammar is no more considered as a meaningless, context-independent set of rules prescribed about language forms but it is regarded with respect to communication (Ellis, 2006).

Grammar has a tricky essence and its teaching and learning has brought about inconsistencies and complicated issues in education (Dekeyser, 1995). Inceptions of new psychological theories or methods have put grammar in the limelight while rejection or break down of theories has led to its abandonment (Borg, 1999). There have been times grammar is seen as pivotal to language instruction and times when it has been disregarded. With this in mind, it seems that language teachers have established distinctive views on grammar.

The importance of investigating teachers' beliefs is highlighted when we see teachers as effective decision makers responsible for what goes on in the classroom (Woods, 1996). Teachers' views have been acquired through their experiences and interactions which in turn can go along with the methods and techniques they use in the classroom (Smith, 1996). It is beyond denial that the instructional decisions made by teachers are to a large extent dependent on the assumptions, attitudes, and theories that teachers possess (Johnson, 1994; Burns, 1996).

There have been different conceptualizations for teacher cognition. Kagan (1992) believes that teacher cognition is an amalgamation of teachers' assumptions about instruction, students, learning, and interactions in the classrooms. Borg (2003, p. 41) describes teacher cognition as 'beliefs, knowledge, theories, attitudes, images, assumptions, learning, students, subject matter, curricula, materials, instructional activities, and self'. Also Borg (1999, p. 22) defines teacher cognitions as 'consisting of a set of personally-defined practically oriented understanding of teaching and learning which exert significant influence on instructional decisions'. Borg (2003) characterizes the importance of social and instructional contexts in the study of teacher cognition. Borg (2003, p. 14) recommends further that 'the impact of contextual factors on the instructional decisions teachers make in teaching grammar'. Terms such as teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and theories have been used for the idea of teacher cognition (Borg, 2007). Issues such as the thought processes of teachers, what they know, how they come to know this, and how they use their knowledge in the classroom have been amongst the priorities of researchers in this area (Borg, 2007).

A particular facet in teacher cognition is teachers' beliefs about grammar and its teaching. Considering the key position of grammar in second language acquisition and teaching methodology, teachers' view about grammar cannot be ignored. Some of the questions raised in this regard are what grammatical points should be addressed? How much time should be devoted to teaching grammar? What class procedures are appropriate for a specific context? and in what sequences should these points be presented? (Yim, 1993).

Some studies have investigated teacher's beliefs about grammar and its teaching. Richards et al., (2001) explored

the beliefs of a group of English teachers about grammar. Communicative approach and direct grammar teaching were both favored by these teachers. It was also indicated that students knew the value of grammar and asked for its teaching. Farrell (2006) examined the extent to which the beliefs of teachers determine their classroom actions. It was found that beliefs affect what teachers do in the classroom. Farrell (1999) investigated the beliefs of pre-service teachers. It was found that while they were in service their beliefs did not change.

Investigations in the issue of grammar has revealed substantial areas such as relationship between L2 learning and grammar (Johnson, 1994), specification of the importance of grammar terminology (Garret, 1986), feedback and error correction in teaching grammar (Dekeyser, 1995) and inductive versus deductive approach (Dekeyser, 1993). However, Borg (1999) mentions that results of research in this area are indeterminate and our conception on how grammar is dealt with is incomplete.

It has to be underlined that teachers' views must be taken into account since these beliefs influence how teachers teach (Ellis, 1997). Shavelson and Stern (1981, p. 546) have mentioned that teachers are 'rational professionals who make judgments and decisions in an uncertain and complex environment'. It has been suggested that the context in which teachers work is a determining factor in shaping their beliefs towards teaching (Cabaroğlu & Roberts, 2000). In the same vein, teacher's gender, experience, and work environment are among the important criteria that can affect teacher's beliefs about grammar. It is important to investigate how these factors influence teacher's beliefs of grammar. Based on what has been discussed so far the following questions were posed to be answered in this study:

- 1- How different are school EFL teachers' beliefs and institute EFL teachers' beliefs about grammar and its teaching?
- 2- How different are more experienced and less experienced EFL teachers' beliefs about grammar and its teaching?
- 3- How different are male and female EFL teachers' beliefs about grammar and its teaching?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The sample of this study consisted of forty EFL teachers in Iran. They were chosen from a public high school (twenty) and a private language institute (twenty). These participants were chosen because the researcher had access to them. Institute language teachers taught courses at elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels. Public school teachers taught the textbooks assigned by the ministry of education; while the private school teachers taught Interchange Courses. The teachers were consisted of twenty male and twenty female teachers. Their teaching experience ranged from 2 to 20 years. Following Chan (2008) I chose five years of teaching as the cut-off point between experienced and inexperienced teachers. Again twenty of the sample had teaching experience of five years and above, twenty other had teaching experience of less than five years.

For answering to the open ended question four volunteer teachers were chosen; two from public school and the other two from the institute. These teachers were different in work experience (two experienced, two inexperienced) and gender (two males, two females).

2.2 Instruments

The researcher devised the questionnaire to assess teachers' beliefs about grammar and its teaching. This questionnaire consists of 25 questions answered on a 5 likert scale ranging from 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree. An open-ended question consisting of three parts also was distributed among volunteer teachers to further investigate their beliefs about grammar.

2.3 Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed among the institute and public school teachers. Teachers took the questionnaire either before or after class time and marked the response that best described their beliefs. As for the open-ended question, the four volunteer teachers took the sheet home and returned it on their next appearance.

2.4 Data analysis

SPSS software was used in analyzing the data. T-test was used to determine if the differences between the groups were significant. The groups were male and female teachers, more experienced and less experienced teachers, and school

teachers and institute teachers. To compare the means independent T-test was used for each group. For the open ended question qualitative analysis was used.

3. Results

3.1 Gender and beliefs of grammar

The first comparison was on male and female English language teachers to see if they have different views. Table 1 shows that the difference between the means of these two group was significant ($p = .009$).

Table 1. Mean, Standard deviation, and P value for male and female teachers

| Groups | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | P |
|--------|----|--------|----------------|------|
| Female | 20 | 69.530 | 7.365 | .007 |
| Male | 20 | 62.373 | 4.235 | |

A female teacher stated 'I think using games is helpful in teaching grammar because it makes language teaching fun' another female said 'In teaching grammar it is better if we state some examples first and then describe the rule'. Our female teachers believed that a variety of tasks and activities should be used in teaching grammar to keep students interested. Male teachers stated that they mostly correct students on the spot to prevent fossilization. Their approach seemed to be deductive; they believed 'students became distracted if the rule was not explained first'. A male teacher believed 'students must be corrected by the teacher; I do not think students can learn from each other'. A female teacher commented 'role play and problem solving are helpful strategies in teaching grammar.

3.2 Experience and beliefs of grammar

The second comparison was on experienced and inexperienced language teachers to see if their beliefs were different. Table 2 shows that the difference between the means of the two groups was significant ($p = .002$)

Table 2. Mean, Standard deviation, and P value for experienced and inexperienced teachers

| Groups | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | P |
|---------------|----|--------|----------------|------|
| Experienced | 20 | 72.530 | 7.912 | .002 |
| Inexperienced | 20 | 69.830 | 7.653 | |

An experienced teacher believed that 'Practice of structures must always be within a full, communicative context'. Another contended 'separate treatment on grammar fails to produce language knowledge'. He said 'students learn grammar best if it is presented within a text. An inexperienced teacher believed 'in teaching grammar focus should be on forms and structures' another naïve teacher stated 'games are a distraction in teaching grammar'; she believed that in teaching grammar form is more important than meaning. The same teacher believed that grammar is more important in speaking.

3.3 Work environment and beliefs of grammar

The third comparison was between teachers who taught at public schools and those at institutes. Table 3 shows that the difference between the means of these two groups was significant ($p = .000$).

Table 3. Mean, standard deviation, and P value for public school and private institutes

| Groups | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | P |
|-------------------|----|--------|----------------|------|
| School teacher | 20 | 63.535 | 4.500 | .000 |
| Institute teacher | 20 | 72.300 | 7.653 | |

An institute teacher believed that 'I think other teaching materials should also be used besides textbooks as they can give exercises for further practice and they give variety to the teaching of grammar'. Our two institute teachers believed that teaching aids such as objects and pictures must be used in the teaching of grammar. They also welcomed using games and tasks such as role play and jigsaw tasks. Also they believed 'teamwork and group work are helpful in teaching grammar'. On the other hand, a public school teacher believed 'I mostly use written language in teaching grammar and I do not believe in using oral language in grammar teaching'; 'games are not more than a distraction in language teaching' 'using materials other than the school textbooks are not practical'.

4. Discussion

4.1 Gender differences and beliefs in teaching grammar

As it was shown in the previous chapter the difference between male and female language teachers when it comes to their beliefs about grammar and its teaching was significant. In EFL context in Iran there are obvious differences between male and female teachers. In Iran usually males don't like to be teachers and they become teachers when they cannot find any other profession. There are times that they regard teaching as a temporary job until they find a better profession. The reasons are low payment and social degradation of teachers. Teaching is not seen as a prestigious job. This happens for males as they are considered the breadwinners of their family. For females this is not the case since they are not responsible for the monetary aspects of the family. Because of the above reasons males are not that interested in teaching, they have negative beliefs towards teaching, and these beliefs affect their attitudes and as a result their behavior in the classroom.

The fact is that female teachers use a variety of teaching strategies and techniques to teach a grammatical topic. Not only they are aware of the fact that not all students learn the same way, in practice they consider this by using multiple methods. Female teachers seem to be doing their job wholeheartedly. It seems that female teachers are better informed and are more concerned with teaching skills. They are more interested in teaching as a profession and they try to keep up with new techniques in teaching and learning.

Males on the other hand, are more careless and not motivated to teach. They look for the easiest way to teach the language and grammar without doing much effort. It is said that variety is the spice of life and in teaching grammar teachers should use multiple strategies but it does not happen for male teachers and they stick to one strategy for teaching grammar which we all know is not sufficient. When male teachers are not interested in teaching there is no reason for them to be interested in using games. They also correct students on the spot as they are not patient with grammatical mistakes. And even it explains their deductive approach in teaching grammatical points.

4.2 Experience and different beliefs in teaching grammar

Inexperienced teachers believe that teaching grammar has the highest priority in language teaching. Their major concern is to keep the class disciplined and controlled, so they always use the board in explaining the rules and giving examples for the sake of achieving class control. They do believe that grammar is the most important building block upon which learning of other language aspects is based. As a result they proceed with implanting rootless knowledge in their students' minds.

In contrast, experienced teachers are more aware of how grammar is taught and it is not the core component of learning a language. They are also aware of the fact that grammar classes are usually boring, so they use a variety of teaching styles and use extra activities (adapted or adopted) to keep the students interested and motivated through working out tasks and grammar games.

Inexperienced teachers rarely give feedback and mostly correct errors immediately thinking they are facilitating students' learning. They are not aware of what psychological damage they cause when they correct errors directly and do not give feedback. These effects could be related to motivation, interest, and the hopelessness in learning the language. Experienced teachers know when and how to give feedback bearing in mind what positive or negative psychological effect they cause.

Inexperienced teachers usually have boring classes as they are the main speaker, explaining rules without varying teaching techniques or using extra activities which can enrich learning and make it more interesting. Experienced teachers give much emphasis to learning process rather than on classroom management and control. Although some of the experienced teachers believe that learning a language means learning its grammar, the way they run their classes is different and more enjoyable than inexperienced teachers.

4.3 Work environment and different beliefs in teaching grammar

Public schools in Iran are a place where a language teacher does everything she wishes in terms of knowledge delivery as a result of the lack in mentoring, supervising, and guiding. Believing that grammar is the main component of language learning, they proceed in teaching as part of knowledge transmission process without taking into consideration quality teaching. Indeed lack of resources such as library, teaching aids, and computers causes them to avoid using other sources except the textbook. Even the textbooks do not contain genuine material and are imposed on the schools by the authorities.

The situation in private institutions is different. Each institute has some teaching standards to stick to in order to provide satisfactory education services to the public. Classes are less crowded in private institutes and students seem to be more interested there. These reasons affect the approach of teachers to the issues including grammar. Even in terms of payment it is more appropriate in private institutes which causes more qualified teachers to be working there. These teachers are more interested as teaching is their lifelong profession. They use varying techniques and supplementary materials that allow students to produce and use the language without solely focusing on form and neglecting meaning.

Sometimes public school teachers are not to blame as they lack training. They do not usually give feedback or use extra activities as they are teaching. This is the culture that exists in the public sector. In teaching grammar they do not give feedback or use extra activities as they are not motivated. On the contrary, Private school teachers are eager to give feedback and praise their students and they consider how suitable this feedback is.

5. Conclusion

The study examined whether variables such as teachers' gender, experience, and work environment affect English teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar. The findings revealed that the three mentioned variables make a difference in affecting teachers' beliefs. Considering the first variable; gender, the study showed that female teachers had different beliefs about grammar and its teaching. This is attributed to males not being interested in this profession due to socioeconomic factors.

When it comes to second variable which is experience, the findings showed that it makes a significant difference in teachers' beliefs. The reason can be the fact that for experienced teachers what is important is knowledge and mental preparation not a pre-determined lesson plan. Experienced teachers focus on students' learning styles and techniques that suit their students while inexperienced teachers are more concerned about knowledge delivery, classroom management, and classroom control.

The third variable also played a significant role in teachers' beliefs about grammar. Teachers contended that students in private institutes are more interested in the lesson. Also the air of private institutes is different to that of public schools. There teachers are more cooperative. Another important factor is different textbooks. While in public schools textbooks are prepared by the science ministry, in private institutes courses like Interchange are taught that have a stronger regard for communicative skills which make students much more interested. Another factor that affects private institutes' beliefs about grammar is availability of resources by which teachers can reinforce the subjects taught and provide students with supplementary material.

Demographic factors (in this study gender and experience) and contextual factors (work environment in this study) affect beliefs about grammar and its teaching. For the context variable the results of the study are in parallel with previous research; context has a huge effect on teachers' beliefs of grammar (Borg, 1999). Role of collegial support and school climate are crucial in teachers' beliefs.

Also for the experience factor which is a demographic factor we see that the findings of the study are in line with previous research. Experience has a significant effect on teacher's beliefs about grammar (Borg 1999). But when it comes to the gender variable we see that the results of this study are different to previous ones. While in previous research gender had no effect on teachers' beliefs (Borg, 1998), in this study its impact was significant. The reasons might be the low income of Iranian teachers and the fact that sadly males are not oriented to getting a job in the teaching profession. Maybe this is something that happens only in Iran and this can be why the results are in contradiction to previous studies.

The findings also suggest the necessity of continuous pre-service and in-service training of teachers. Teacher education must be seen as a continuous process that allows teachers get acquainted with new trends and reflect on their beliefs and practices. Teachers are advised to discuss their views and ideas and receive feedback on their teaching. This helps teachers improve their apprehension about their profession. In the present study teachers were not observed in the

classroom. The actual observation of teachers can enhance the results of this study in order to come to further qualitative evidence on how these factors affect teachers' belief about grammar.

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