

15 Teachers' Practices and Beliefs about Explicit Grammar Teaching

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1 INTRODUCTION

Explicit grammar teaching is a feature of the work of English language teachers in lower secondary schools in Oman, officially known as Cycle 2 schools, and there has been much interest in recent years in analysing how teachers teach grammar and why (Borg, 2003). Although some studies have investigated teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in the Omani context (e.g. Al-Alawi, 2008), no research has been carried out, to my knowledge, on experienced English language teachers' beliefs and practices with regards to explicit grammar teaching in Omani lower secondary schools. The purpose of this study then is carry out such research with reference to Grade 8 teachers.

2 TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Teachers' beliefs can greatly impact on their decisions and judgements in the classroom (Tillema, 2000). They can be defined as an attitude consistently applied to an activity that guides both our thoughts and behaviours (Eisenhart et al., 1988, in Farrell & Lim, 2005). However, teachers' beliefs are not directly observable, so they are not easy to study (Johnson, 1994).

Research in English language teaching in the last 15 years has provided much evidence of the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices. While beliefs clearly do influence what teachers do, teachers' instructional decisions do not always reflect their beliefs (Borg, 2006).

Beliefs form a structured set of principles that are derived from school practices, a teacher's prior experiences, and a teacher's individual personality. Therefore, there is a growing realization of the need to understand the underlying belief systems of language teachers and the impact these have on their classroom practices (Borg, 2003). It is also now accepted that understanding teachers' beliefs is essential to improving teaching practices and teacher education programs (Johnson, 1994).

2.1 Explicit grammar teaching

The explicit grammar teaching approach remains a feature of English language teaching in Oman, at secondary levels. It is more suitable with older learners as they are able to analyze the structure of the language and focus consciously on grammar. Explicit grammar work can involve two distinct ways of encouraging learners to notice grammar. Firstly, inductive grammar techniques guide learners to work out information about forms and their functions for themselves (Scrivener, 1994; Batstone, 1994). Secondly, deductive grammar techniques involve teachers in presenting rules and examples to learners who subsequently apply these rules in practice (Ur, 1996; Gollin, 1998).

Thornbury (1999) suggests explanations, translation, grammar worksheets and self study as strategies that can be used in teaching grammatical structures explicitly. These four strategies can be divided into oral strategies that involve explanations and translations, and written strategies which involve grammar worksheets and self study. In addition, Ellis (2006) suggests four types of grammar teaching which are presentation only, practice only, eliciting production of the structure without presentation or practice and corrective feedback on learners' errors in communicative tasks. Larsen- Freeman (2001) argues that it is unlikely that any one approach to teaching grammar would work equally well in class for all learners.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

The general research question for this study was "What strategies do Grade 8 Basic Education teachers apply when teaching explicit grammar activities?" I also addressed the following sub-questions:

1. What are the most common strategies used by the teachers?
2. What are teachers' beliefs about explicit grammar teaching?
3. Is there a relationship between the teachers' beliefs and practices?
4. What factors influence teachers' beliefs and practices in grammar teaching?

3.2 Context & Participants

The study involved four Grade 8 English language teachers. They were all male and had over 15 years' experience teaching English in both General and Basic Education schools. They had been teaching the new Basic Education curriculum for about four years. The participants taught at the same school and were chosen for this study because they volunteered to participate.

3.3 Data Collection & Analysis

A qualitative case study approach was used to collect the data. This approach was relevant to my study given that I wanted to examine in some detail the work of a specific number of participants (Brown & Rodgers, 2002). Data were collected through four non-participant observations, pre-observation interviews and post observation semi-structured interviews conducted over a period of one month. One observation and a follow-up interview were piloted with another teacher who was not involved in the actual study. This process was valuable particularly in allowing me to develop the interview questions.

I conducted one pre-observation interview with each participant. The purpose of this interview was to give participants information about the study to agree on dates for the observations. In this initial meeting, I also explained to the participants that the observations would be not connected in any way with appraisal and that they should teach as they normally did.

The non-participant observations were open-ended and lasted around 45 minutes. Their aim was to obtain information about the strategies used by the teachers in teaching grammar explicitly. I attended classes and made notes about what the teachers did, paying particular attention to the teaching of grammar. To help me focus on issues relevant to my research questions I used an observation sheet with some prompts on it (e.g. about which structures were being taught, how grammar was introduced, whether rules were made explicit and if so how, whether practice was provided, and how the teacher responded to grammatical errors). The issues that I focused on were informed by discussions of explicit grammar teaching in the literature (e.g. Thornbury, 1999)

The post-observation interviews lasted around 20 minutes each. The interviews were semi-structured, which means that I had some prepared questions but was also able to introduce additional questions during the interview as required. Semi-structured interviews also offer the researcher the flexibility to ask follow-up questions which encourage respondents to clarify points they have made (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 1996). The interview questions aimed to elicit information about teachers' beliefs regarding explicit grammar teaching. The four interviews were, with the permission of the participants, audio-recorded. To facilitate their analysis, as suggested by Burton & Bartlett (2005), the interviews were transcribed in full (see Appendix for an example).

The observations were analyzed for evidence of different strategies the teachers used in teaching grammar explicitly (as noted above, I was guided by the literature in identifying different types of strategies). The interviews were also analyzed for evidence of the beliefs teachers expressed about teaching grammar explicitly.

4 FINDINGS

Table 1 summarizes the range of explicit grammar teaching strategies identified for each teacher through the observations and interviews. In this table, an O means that a strategy was observed or talked about positively by a teacher (i.e. the teacher believed it worked), while an X means that it was not observed or talked about. I will refer to this table in the presentation of findings that follows.

Table 1: Explicit grammar teaching strategies used by the teachers

	Observations				Interviews			
	T1	T 2	T 3	T4	T1	T 2	T 3	T4
Translation	○	X	X	○	○	X	X	○
Oral Explanation	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Providing examples	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Group work	○	○	X	X	○	○	○	○
Comprehension Qus.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Eliciting the rule	X	○	X	X	○	○	○	○
Writing explanations	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Error correction	X	○	○	X	○	○	○	○
Deductive	○	○	○	○	○	X	○	○
Inductive	X	○	X	X	X	○	X	X

4.1 Strategies Used By All Teachers

Table 1 shows that oral explanations, providing examples, comprehension questions and writing explanations were strategies used by all the teachers. Also, in the interviews they all expressed strong beliefs in the value of these strategies. Overall, these were deductive strategies – they involved teachers in explaining rules which the students then applied. For example, regarding the provision of examples, one teacher explained that they try to provide many examples to clarify their explanations. Oral explanations were also popular; T1 said he likes this strategy because “...it is easy to explain something in detail”.

All the teachers were observed explaining grammar on the whiteboard. T1 used arrows and underlined the main words to clarify the explanation, while T2 underlined the main words; T3 drew diagrams to explain grammar while T4 highlighted the suffixes of the adjectives in explaining comparative forms. All the teachers used coloured pens to highlight the main words in the examples they provided. T1 argued that “it is useful to let them know that this is the language that they are going to learn, so it is important for them”. All the teachers used comprehension questions at the end of the explanations to check students’ understanding.

4.2 Strategies Used By Some Teachers

Group work strategies were used by three teachers while teaching grammatical structures. However, in the interview all the teachers agreed that group work is an as important strategy in teaching explicit grammar. Translation and error correction strategies were used only by two teachers. However, in the interview, all the teachers said they believed in the value of error correction. Overall, their preferred approach was to first encourage peer correction and only to provide teacher correction where the students were not able to suggest the correction themselves. However, one of the teachers preferred to recycle the structure to allow students to correct their own mistakes rather than to correct directly. He argued that “errors should be corrected through providing examples, recycling and make students

correcting their own mistakes. No need to declare mistakes in the class because they will feel embarrassed”.

Regarding translation, two teachers presented and practised the structure in English without using Arabic. One of the teachers said that “it is useful to use English with students to help them using the language. In my opinion it is not useful to use Arabic, so you have to use English because it is an English lesson”. The other two teachers used translation to explain the meaning of the English structure by comparing it with a similar structure in the students’ mother tongue. One teacher’s position on the use of Arabic in teaching grammar was that “it depends. I start with English but if I feel it is necessary I use it”.

Inductive and eliciting the rule strategies were only observed in the teaching of one teacher. However, in the interviews, all the teachers said they believed that eliciting some information about the structure from the students was valuable. For example, T2 said that “I prefer to elicit the rule from the students. If you elicit the rule from the students it means they understand the structure. If you explain it by yourself it may be difficult for them to understand quickly”.

5 DISCUSSION

The above results raise several issues relevant to teachers’ beliefs and practices in explicit grammar teaching.

5.1 Explicit Grammar Teaching Strategies

In terms of the strategies teachers used, these reflected several of those mentioned in the literature; there was a greater emphasis though on deductive rather than inductive work. The teachers believed that deductive work is an effective way of checking learners’ understanding. Additionally, such an approach and specifically the use of oral and written explanations, provides learners with oral and visual support in understanding and remembering grammatical structures. One observation on my part though was that, although the explanations may have helped learners’ explicit understanding of the grammar, there were not many opportunities in the lessons I observed for learners to actually use the grammar in meaningful contexts. Where practice was provided, it consisted mainly of answering questions and gap filling. Most of these activities do not place grammar into contextualized into meaningful communicative situations (Farrell & Lim, 2005). Therefore, they do not offer opportunities for learners to express themselves spontaneously in speaking and writing.

5.2 The Relationship between Teachers’ Beliefs and Practices

Overall, these results suggest that, in teaching grammar explicitly, there was a relationship between the beliefs and practices of the teachers in this study (Farrell & Lim, 2005 reported similar findings). Not all the explicit strategies that the teachers said were valuable were observed in their lessons (most notably, while all teachers said they valued elicitation of rules, only one teacher was observed using this strategy); but there were no examples of teachers using strategies that they

expressed negative views about. Thus, for example, the two teachers who argued that translation can be used in teaching explicit grammar used it in their teaching, while the two teachers who explained that translation should not be used in teaching grammar avoided it.

One of my aims in this study was also to explore the influences on teachers' beliefs. Not much data directly relevant to this issue emerged; the little that did suggested that the primary source of teachers' beliefs are their own experiences as language teachers. There was also one brief reference in the data which pointed to the influence on teachers' practices of their supervisors, but there was not enough information here for me to offer any firm conclusions. This is, though, an interesting issue for further work and a factor which may be influential in shaping what teachers do.

5.3 Limitations

This study suggests that there is value in qualitative work which examines both what teachers do and their reasons for choosing particular instructional practices. In considering the results presented here, though, we must remember that a small group of male experienced teachers were studied and that they were only observed and interviewed on one occasion each. Also, as noted above, the interviews did not elicit much insight into the sources of teachers' beliefs. In further work of this kind I would recommend that several observations be conducted with each teacher to build up a better picture of their work and that the interviews be linked more directly to what is observed in the classroom; in this study the interviews did not make specific reference to what the teachers did. A more formal pre-observation interview would also be valuable in obtaining information about the teachers' background and general views about teaching English.

6 CONCLUSION

Explicit grammar teaching is and will remain an important strategy for teaching grammar in secondary English classes in Oman. The literature suggests a number of ways in which grammar can be taught explicitly and this study has shown that deductive strategies involving oral and written explanations were common in the work of the teachers who participated here. There was less evidence of more inductive work and this is perhaps an issue which might be addressed at in-service workshops for secondary school teachers of English. One other suggestion that emerges from this study is that there may be value in providing teachers with opportunities to talk with colleagues about how they teach grammar; the teachers in this study seemed entirely dependent on their own experience in deciding how to teach and the sharing of experiences among individual teachers could allow teachers to become aware of additional ways of teaching grammar.

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APPENDIX: SAMPLE INTERVIEW

(R=Researcher, T=Teacher)

- R: First of all I would like to thank you for allowing me to attend the lesson. As you know my study is about Grade 8 teachers' practices and beliefs about explicit grammar so in this research I am going to focus on the strategies that are used by teachers in teaching grammar. So, what I mean by explicit is that the rules are directly presented to the students orally or on the board so they know that this is a rule and the lesson is about grammar. Do you prefer to use oral explanations or written explanations? And why?
- T: It depends on the students as I said to you but I prefer to teach grammar orally because it is easy to explain something in detail. Written sometimes depends on the students background. If the students didn't have enough background in grammar, it is difficult to teach them grammar in written way.
- R: Are there any problems you face with explicit grammar teaching? If yes, what are they?
- T: Yes, but the main problem in teaching grammar is students' low levels.
- R: Can you suggest any ideas to be used with students in explicit grammar teaching to increase their understanding?
- T: Yes there are a lot of ideas in improving students to learn grammar. First, the students should be able to cope with the grammar orally teaching not written. Next the students should be able to memorise the types of a sentence. It is very important because students don't write a sentence. That's how to teach grammar without students being able to write a sentence or a clause which is a part of the sentence. Give students more enough time to discuss some grammatical rules among themselves.
- R:: Do you prefer to explain the structure in Arabic or English?
- T: Sometimes, the situation needs to explain in Arabic to explain more activities if they don't understand the rule. Sometimes, we use little Arabic to explain the rule. I think it is useful as teaching facilities.
- R: Do you prefer to use comparison while explaining the rule?
- T: Yes, it enables me to explain the action which happens or not to distinguish the meanings.
- R:: Is it useful to encourage students to give examples about the structure?
- T: I think this is the way that we should use in order to show that the students understand the structure.
- R: Which is more effective, to ask students to work individually or in groups while practicing the structure?
- T: I think it is more effective to ask students to work in groups. For example, I have six sentences... students underline the verbs. I think it is better for students to work in groups rather than individually.
- R: Why?
- T: Because if the students don't understand, other students..... Students can teach each other if the teacher cannot explain this rule. When they work in groups, they can be more effective.