

THE FACTORS SHAPING K-12 ESL TEACHERS' THINKING ABOUT FORM-FOCUSED INSTRUCTION

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Designing and delivering effective grammar instruction remains a difficult, even stressful process for English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. With abundant instructional options to choose from, teachers' decision-making regarding which grammar teaching approaches to take offers a rich arena for exploring teacher thinking. This paper investigates teacher thinking to explore the factors that influence the grammar instructional decisions of K-12 ESL teachers in a Midwestern city in the United States in which ELLs receive pull-out English language classes. Such factors included teachers' desire for grammar instruction to be authentic, the impact of students' English proficiency level, and the teachers' perceptions of their students' linguistic needs and readiness for grammar instruction. Based on the findings, the authors highlight several implications related to grammar teaching.

Keywords: *form-focused instruction, teacher thinking, grammar teaching, English language learners, K-12 ESL instruction*

INTRODUCTION

Despite the profusion of research on what makes for good and bad grammar instruction (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Crystal, 2004; Ellis, 2001, 2006; Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001, 2002, 2006; Long, 1991; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Sheen, 2003, 2005; Spada & Lightbown, 2008) teachers still routinely report feeling unsure about their approaches to the teaching of grammar. Rather than taking a prescriptive approach to grammar instruction by asserting there are right or wrong ways to teach grammar, this report will examine the factors that teachers, in their own teaching and learning settings, rely on to make decisions about 'good' grammar instruction.

Throughout the history of grammar instruction, numerous grammar-teaching approaches have emerged, and continue to emerge, each varying in its perspectives on the quantity and the quality of focus- on - the form of a language (Nassaji & Fotos, 2010). Among these, a current debate rages regarding whether focusing on grammar within a communicative context or in isolated forms is best. Both types of approach (within communicative context or not) fall under one umbrella term, Form-Focused Instruction (FFI).

Before we take a look back at the research that has shaped the field, we would like to point out that the contribution of this study to the field is twofold. First, this study was conducted

in K-12 public schools in which students of different grades receive language education through pull-out ESL sessions, a setting which is under-researched (Borg, 2006). Second, this study offers insight into FFI at an interesting time in the field of TESOL, particularly within K-12 contexts as communicative language teaching (CLT) continues to predominate, yet accountability systems pressure teachers to focus on form (see Spada, 2013 for further discussion about FFI and CLT). This study, however, shows that ELL teachers' understanding and practice of FFI are determined by circumstantial factors, which requires them to make decisions where and how to attend to form and/or meaning.

Research regarding ESL teachers' beliefs and practices about grammar instruction exist in multiple settings, although few exist in the U.S. K-12 situation. Previous settings include, for example, Hong Kong and Singapore (Andrews, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2006; Andrews & McNeil, 2005; Chia, 2003; Farrell & Lim, 2005; Ng & Farrell, 2003). As a guiding principle, we recognize grammar instruction as situated. This *situated* nature of grammar instruction means that students, in all their heterogeneity, and the disparateness of classroom environment are critical to effective grammar instruction. The success of a teacher's work regarding the teaching of grammar is influenced and shaped to a great extent by these factors. In addition, one needs to focus on what teachers say and do as "professional decision-maker[s]" (Nassaji & Fotos, 2010) to better understand their mentality. For that reason, we note the need to broaden the examination of FFI and teachers' thinking about it in the U.S. K-12 context.

Form-Focused Instruction

The approach of focusing on grammar within a meaningful context (Focus-on-form) was proposed by Long at a conference in Italy as early as 1988. Long (1991) prioritized meaning over grammar and argued for a strategic focus on grammar. According to him, discrete attention to grammar in meaningless chunks as in Focus-on-FormS (FoFS) would not help language learners to be accurate language users because the primary concern was the construction of the grammatical form. Ellis (2001) stated that FoFS forced learners to "[f]unction as students rather than users of the language" (p. 14) by teaching it as an "object". Later, Ellis (2001) categorized FFI under three subtitles: Focus-on-Forms, Planned Focus-on-form (FoF) and Incidental Focus-on-form (FoF). The former FoF is arranged according to a previously designed lesson which includes appointed grammar structures while the latter includes attention to forms of a language only if initiated by students' inquiries or, on some occasions, a teacher inquiry. In 2008, Spada and Lightbown relabeled Focus-on-form as "Integrated Form-Focused Instruction". In addition, they used the term "Isolated FFI" which resonates with Focus-on-FormS because it involves inducing the learners' attention to form out of a communicative context. They have claimed that Isolated FFI is different than Focus-on-FormS as it was used "as a preparation for a communicative activity or after an activity in which students have experienced difficulty with a particular language feature" (p.186). Essentially, Isolated FFI indicated the study of language forms connected or related to a meaningful, communicative activity.

While numerous research studies began to explore Focus-on-form instruction (Ellis et al., 2001, 2002; Loewen, 2005; Sheen, 2003, 2005) strongly argued that FoFS was not being understood correctly within scholarship. He claimed that FoFS actually did enhance language acquisition, and he attempted to show that in a comparative study (Sheen, 2005). In this eight month study, 6th grade Francophone students who received instructions on adverb placement and question forms in FoFS showed more accurate use in their oral language compared to the group treated using FoF.

Advocates of teaching grammar within a meaningful context (FoF) might be said to see language as a “whole elephant” (Andrews, 2006; p. 9) and prefer attention to the parts of the elephant when/if needed. On the other hand, advocates of grammar teaching in isolated forms (FoFS) favor discrete attention to each part. In any case, the general consensus today seems to be on application of the appropriate grammar teaching approach according to the existing classroom circumstances (Ellis, 2006).

The Role of the Teachers

While both parties, FoFS and FoF, argue about the effectiveness of the instruction that they favor, we turn our attention to what K-12 ESL teachers actually prefer vis-à-vis language instruction in today’s public school ESOL classrooms by investigating what factors impact teacher thinking in regards to their own use of FFI. Language teacher education programs may offer teacher candidates much knowledge about grammar instruction, including attention to the prongs of FFI. However, when it comes to classroom teaching, it is the teachers themselves who actually organize grammar instruction with their preferred approach and techniques while working within their own particular ecologies (Borg, 2006). Therefore, we asked ourselves: what, then, influences teachers’ thinking regarding FFI? Considering the abundant literature investigating effective and efficient ways of grammar teaching, we felt the need to look at this ongoing discussion from the teachers’ perspectives. Consequently, in this present study, we endeavored to focus on this central question: *What factors guide U.S. K-12 teachers’ grammar instruction choices to use FoF or FoFS?*

This study sheds light on the factors mediating ESL teachers’ practices related to grammar, and, as such, will be of interest to language teachers, teacher educators, and educational researchers. By integrating the synthesis of this study’s findings, language teaching professionals can reflect on the incidents that shape grammar teaching practices and consider the factors in their own situations that may, similarly or dissimilarly, be impactful on teachers’ grammar instruction decision-making.

In the ensuing section, we first introduce the method employed for participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. In the subsequent section, we present the findings in themes that emerged from the analysis and elaborate upon our findings in detail.

METHOD

Participants

All of the 75 elementary and secondary ESL teachers in a mid-sized school district in the U.S. Midwest were invited to participate in this study. A total of 58 replies (77.3%) were received. Of the responses, eight were from high school teachers, eight from middle school, and 42 from elementary ESL teachers (Table 1). One teacher did not provide information regarding age and two teachers did not provide information regarding their ESL teaching years of experience.

Table 1

Demographics

Gender	Male		Female		
N	8		50		
Age Categories	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+
Frequencies	10	16	9	18	4
ESL					

Teaching years	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21+
Frequencies	19	28	1	3	5

These teachers varied in the years of experiences in the profession and similarly differed in their initial degrees before becoming an ESL teacher. ESL licensure in the state of this study was add-on or supplemental; therefore, all ESL teachers were endorsed in an initial subject area (e.g. elementary education or secondary social studies) before gaining an ESL endorsement (see Reeves, 2010 for ESOL certification).

Data Collection

In light of our research question, we chose to utilize survey research. Surveys offer an effective means of gathering information about the background, beliefs, and opinions of the interest groups in a general, big-picture way (Dornyei, 2003). Surveys have the added benefit of reaching a large number of informants in a short period of time, and standardized questionnaires, as the one used in this study, result in high reliability (Barribeau et al., 2005).

For this study, survey research made it possible to capture the beliefs and perceptions of the ESL teachers in a mid-sized school district (total enrollment of just over 34,000 students) in the U.S. Midwest. The result was a considerable amount of data about the general population of K-12 ESL teachers' preferred approaches to grammar teaching, including their beliefs about FoFS and FoF, and their demographic information.

The Instrument

The survey, *K-12 ESL Teachers' Attitudes Towards and Use of Form-Focused Instruction*, was conducted to find out ESL teacher's perceptions of and approaches to grammar teaching as well as to identify the elements of FFI (Form-Focused Instruction) within their statements.

The survey (Appendix A) consisted of a 5-point Likert-scale (Part 1) and open-ended questions and scenario questions (Part 2). The questions in Part 1 were designed by using the key characteristics of FFI as delineated by Ellis (2001). Scenario questions in Part 2 were constructed using common English learner errors. These scenarios, along with the open-ended questions at the end of Part 1, allowed the respondents to write about their reasoning, thereby gathering some qualitative, open-ended data in addition to the Likert data collected in the first part of the survey. The survey ended with demographic questions that allowed building a general teacher profile of the participants. The biographical account of the teachers presented varieties in their backgrounds; yet, despite this variation, the analysis of the teachers' opinions about the centrality of grammar in the study of English, interestingly, revealed similarities, which will be examined in the results and discussion section. To sum up, through the use of Likert-scale statements, open-ended questions and scenarios, this research can be described as "sandwiched" between quantitative and qualitative research (Mackey, 2006).

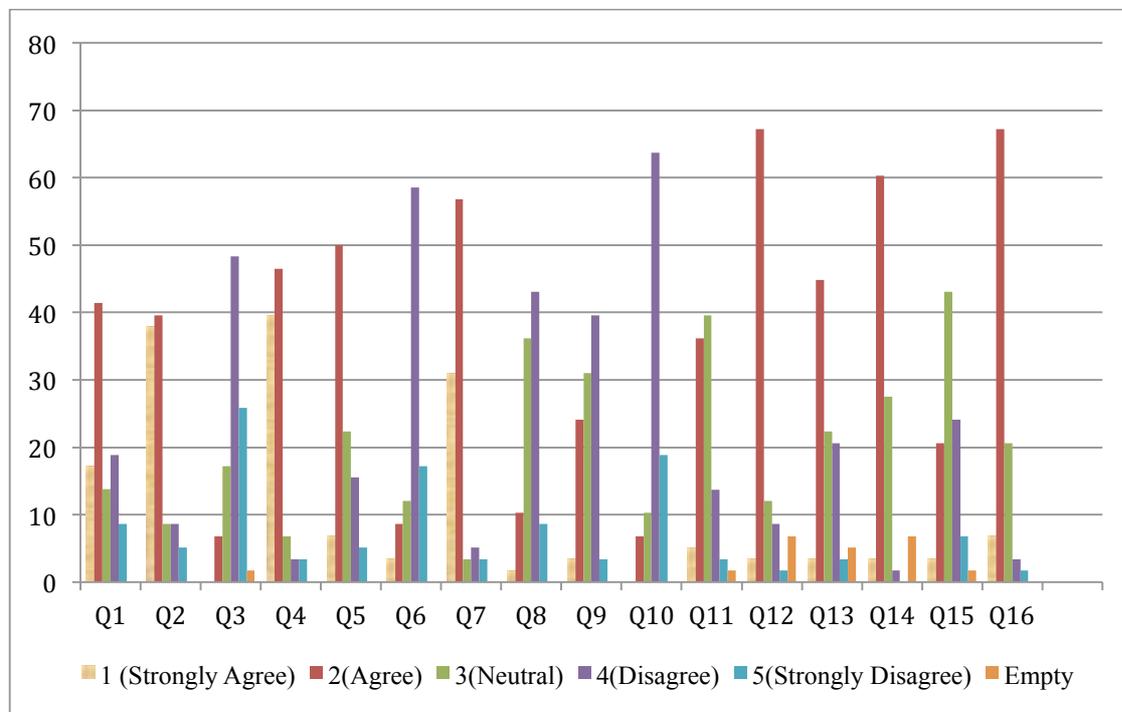
Following approvals from both the school district and an institutional IRB, the principal investigator of this study contacted the principals of participating schools (all who had ELLs) via e-mail asking for their approval to approach their school's ESL teachers. All principals agreed to allow the research study in their schools. Between December 2008 and February 2009, individually enveloped surveys with attached informed consent letters were delivered to the lead ESL teacher of each school (eleven elementary, four secondary and two junior high). After receiving a brief verbal summary of the study, the head teachers were requested to give copies of

the survey to the ESL teachers at their schools. Participants were asked to drop completed surveys into a box provided by the primary researcher, and boxes were collected from each school office at the end of the survey period (approximately three weeks). A total of 75 surveys were distributed.

Data Analysis

Each survey received was grouped according to either secondary (grades six through 12) or elementary school (grades kindergarten (K) through five) and numbered. As a result, survey numbers from 1-16 represented secondary school teachers and elementary teachers’ surveys were assigned numbers 17-58. Both frequencies and percentages for each Likert-scale item were calculated (Figure 1). Figure 1 below vividly depicts the opinions of the ESL teachers for each survey question in aggregation regarding the teaching of grammar.

Figure 1. Percentages of each statement



*SA: Strongly Agree A: Agree D: Disagree SD: Strongly Disagree

Once the close-ended questions were analyzed, we read the qualitative data (open-ended questions and additional comments) to get a general sense of the overall meaning (Creswell, 2007). We took notes and underlined words or phrases that seemed as emerging patterns. Later, we coded recurring patterns to identify repeated themes. This close analysis of the survey results made us realize that the data presented some implicit factors that impact teacher grammar instruction preference. Within this paper we focus on these particular factors by taking the following question under consideration: What factors guide teachers to use FoF or FoFS in a K-12 setting?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During our quest to better understand the question above that frames this paper, we found evidence within a K-12 setting that both supports and contradicts findings regarding grammar instructional choices in TESOL adult and foreign language settings. Analysis of the survey data illustrated that three factors proved particularly influential in teachers' thinking about when and how to use FFI: 1) teachers' desire for grammar instruction to be authentic, 2) the impact of students' English proficiency level, and 3) the teachers' perceptions of their students' linguistic needs and readiness for grammar instruction. Each of these three factors is discussed in detail below.

Authenticity

The K-12 ESL teachers in this study put one particular issue at the top of their list of priorities when it came to grammar instruction: authenticity. Looking at participants' statements about authenticity, it became clear to the researchers that authenticity was understood by the teachers in several ways.

One aspect of authenticity that teacher participants discussed was grammar teaching that was embedded in a *meaningful* context. That is, a context that is meaningful to the students. The teachers' strongly disagreed that "Grammar should be taught isolated from a meaningful context," with 74.2% indicating strong disagreement in Part One of the survey. Additionally, teachers provided supporting written comments in the open-ended sections of the survey. Throughout the paper, teachers' responses are reported with the capital letter "T" and an identification number. The numbers 1-16 refer to the secondary level teachers and the numbers 17-58 indicate elementary level teachers. Teachers' comments are verbatim:

T13: I always go with a communicative activity such as a game to touch on certain grammar.

T2: My own personal grammar learning based on whole bunch of exercises and out of context and that they were not beneficial to me. However, observing an expert ESL teacher who approached grammar teaching holistically, within a context or a story, changed my vision in grammar teaching.

Presenting grammar in "context" in ways that were meaningful to students, then, was one aspect of what teachers' meant by authenticity in grammar instruction.

The second aspect of what participants seemed to mean by authenticity was taking advantage of *teachable moments* in the classroom. Many teachers stated that they were ready and willing to go off the plan of the lesson to address a grammar point that fortuitously arose in the moment or during the course of instruction:

T33: ...Teach rules initially but use "teachable moment" [sic] when writing so the rule clicks and makes sense.

An example of "teachable moment" would be when a student uses a sentence with the wrong verb form during a conversation such as, "We go to the park yesterday". The teacher would take advantage of this moment to readdress the rules of the simple past tense. Repeating the important points in the usage of the simple past tense would enhance student learning.

The third aspect of authenticity was how grammar related to current or recent classroom themes. Teachers reported that they routinely focused on certain grammar points either as a continuation or a follow-up to the content that they have been studying recently in their classrooms. For instance, as T7 stated if the topic of the day was "Johnny Appleseed Heads West" in which the past simple tense was the focus as a grammar point, teachers would use the

opportunity to address the features of past simple in connection to the story. In that way, “STUDENTS MAKE SENSE OF PAST SIMPLE” as T7 added in all capital letters.

A final aspect of authenticity arising from the data was grammar instruction that incorporated or advanced the acquisition of school-relevant language, or the language the students would be using in the school setting beyond the ESL classroom. The teacher participants recognized that their students needed to learn English in order to do well in school in general, and therefore participants emphasized the teaching of grammar as it related to authentic language use in classrooms beyond ESL. Teachers added that they tried to construct their lessons in collaboration with the mainstream social studies and language arts teacher:

T 6: ...I am trying to connect kids to general education as much as possible. I try to infuse their topics like “fact and opinion” into my lessons.

The need to introduce the language used in the mainstream subject matters was also one of the primary concerns as seen from the quote above.

Initially, as consistent with previous research on teachers’ thinking about grammar instruction in non K-12 settings, K-12 ESL teachers also felt that grammar knowledge is necessary and an awareness of grammar facilitates language skills (Richards, Gallo & Renandya, 2001). Teacher participants in this study seem to consider grammar as “the language’s heartbeat, its nervous system” (Crystal, 2004; p. 26). ELLs need to have knowledge of grammar “in order to use it right” (T13) as put by one of the teachers. Grammar instruction is not a matter of context-embedded or context-free, “grammar is not either/or” (T3). Specifically, T10’s statement among many exemplified the participants’ strong advocacy for grammar:

T10: We should not get rid of grammar. It needs to be addressed. Some students don’t often hear proper grammar at homes and that’s how you learn it. We need to see more of it coming even in the mainstream.

As provided above, teachers’ statements reveal that authenticity is an important factor in their grammar choices. Looking at this finding through scholarship in the field of TESOL, there is no consensus on the notion of what authenticity is and how authenticity takes shape in the context of teaching grammar (Shomoossi & Ketabi, 2007). The findings from this study, then, provide an opening discussion of authenticity in the teaching of L2 grammar and present this authenticity in four layers. Authenticity is described by the participants as 1) creating an appropriate context; 2) seizing the teachable moment; 3) combination with the task or the content of the focus; or 4) infusing general education curriculum in collaboration with the mainstream teachers. The first three layers - creating an appropriate context, seizing a teachable moment, and integrating the task or the content of the focus with grammar teaching- demonstrate the participants’ conceptualization of good grammar instruction to follow the FoF (focus-on-form) model. Proponents of FoF suggest that grammar teaching is enhanced if addressed within a meaningful context rather than as systematized formulations (Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2001; 2002; Long, 1991). In fact, the K-12 teachers’ preference for teaching target grammar features echo the discussion of meaningfulness in Ellis (2001) and Ellis et al. (2002).

Participant teachers were largely against teaching grammar as an “object” (Ellis, 2001) and simultaneously recognized their students as “users of the language” (Ellis, 2001). Participants were aware that students need contextually appropriate use of grammar in their “real life” and it would be less desirable to teach grammar as “mathematical formulations” as put by one of the teachers.

The fourth layer of authenticity, as identified by the participants, is the intent to integrate grammar instruction with the general curriculum. This notion is similar, if not the same as taking

a content-based instructional approach in the ESL classroom. Content-based instruction is also similar to FoF with its assumption that language learning is effective in a meaningful environment and the assumption here being that students find content areas and content area classrooms meaningful and relevant. More importantly, content-based instruction “allows for form-meaning connections that are important for language development and gives ESL students access to grade-level content as soon as they enter the school system” (Bigelow & Ranney, 2005; p.180). Some of the ESL teachers in this study gave precedence to creating lessons with language objectives along with content objectives, which paralleled the general education curriculum in order to create smooth transition for their students from ESL to the general education classroom. Two sixth grade teachers who were teaching levels 3 and 4 succinctly pointed out this concern:

T11: If they (mainstream teachers) are studying “monuments” I include it in my unit plan so that they don’t miss content knowledge.

T15: I contact with the 6th grade language arts teacher and she sends me their lesson plan for the next couple of weeks along with the writings. The more I teach their language, the easier transitions are for them.

In sum, authenticity that reveals itself here in four different conditions is understood as essential for effective grammar teaching and each facet of authenticity alludes to teacher’s preference for meaningful grammar teaching (FonF) rather than studying it in chunks or decontextualized bits (FonFS). Grammar instruction that failed to be authentic was eschewed.

Student Level of Proficiency

In addition to authenticity, another key factor in teachers’ thinking about how and when to instruct grammar was their students’ proficiency levels in English. In the district of this study, Level 1 indicated the lowest proficiency level and Level 5 indicated near native proficiency (Table 2). In addition, the ESL program was organized by levels and was typically cross-graded. Students identified as ELLs in the district received pull-out ESL classes in groups according to their proficiency level, as measured by district assessments and ESL teacher recommendations.

An example of teacher participants’ expression of this factor was given by T39, “Grammar teaching can be applied in many different ways. The most effective depends on what ELL level your students are at.” Teachers’ choices regarding grammar instruction, then, were informed by what students could and could not do in English.

Table 2
English Language Proficiency Levels

Language Level	Description
Entry	Students with Interrupted Formal Education
1	Pre-functional
2	Beginning
3	Intermediate
4	Advanced
5	Full English Proficiency

(K-12 Guidelines for English Language Learners, 2011)

The school district of this study provided its ESL teachers with rubric checklists that enumerated specific skills that were expected for each proficiency level for each language

domain- speaking, listening, reading, and writing- within particular grade levels. Grammar, while not its own separate domain, was embedded within these domains. For example, T12 as an additional comment, pointed out one of the reading/speaking objectives for grades 6-12 for Level 4 and that she blended the study of comparatives and adjective constructions into her lesson. The objective was:

Compare and contrast social and cultural traditions and values of native country and the United States.

Teachers, then, in response to these similar indicators, incorporate direct or indirect grammar study of the implicit linguistic features into the target objectives.

While the school district had spelled out what ELLs within particular proficiency levels were supposed to be able to do in English, the majority of the participant teachers were keenly aware that students' manifested proficiency level might not match their assigned proficiency. In other words, irrespective of what the rubric said a Level 1 could do, the teacher participants evaluated what each student within their Level 1-and all levels- could actually do based on teacher observation and student work:

T 43: I take into consideration the level at which they're at. Can they understand the material at an appropriate level?

T 48: I feel grammar is important but it really is age appropriate + ELL level.

Multiple teachers' data suggested that once teachers recognized their students' immediate level, they would then design grammar instruction that would fit students' needs, as they believed that not all teaching options would work for all student levels. Data from Part One of the survey (Figure 1) supported this finding in teachers' thinking regarding student proficiency. For instance, Q12 (Explicit grammar teaching is effective with upper level students) and Q13 (Explicit grammar teaching is effective with lower level students) indicated that 67.2% of the teachers believed in explicit grammar teaching's efficacy for higher proficiency level students.

Teachers aligned their grammar approach to their perceptions of students' proficiency levels in the event of error correction as well. Teachers' responses within the scenario questions clearly indicated their inclination for "corrective recasts", i.e. reformulating the learners' own sentence with the correct form (Long, 2007). For example, to the question how might they respond to a student sentence "I go to school yesterday", a teacher (T10) stated that she would simply restate the sentence. She went on by writing, "In class, I'd make corrections depending on the student's ELL level..." Several teachers who were teaching Level 1 stated that they would stress the word "went" during repeating the sentence. There were other Level 1 teachers who preferred a more overt recast that restated the correct form in a question such as, "Do you mean you went to school yesterday?"

In sum, participant teachers' thinking about grammar was clearly impacted by students' abilities and inabilities in English. Further, teachers sought a match between students' proficiency levels and a corresponding quantity and quality of grammar instruction. As one of the elementary ESL teachers wrote, "I think it [appropriate grammar instruction] depends greatly on the language level of the student" (T 21). As depicted above, teachers' instructional decisions showed variance according to the student proficiency level (both anticipated and manifested). If the student level was low, ESL teachers had a preference for the use of recasts. For higher proficiency level students, teachers generally preferred explicit instruction. Teachers' "feedback on error" (Long, 2007) choices followed a similar pattern. Teachers believed high proficiency level students

would benefit from explicit feedback whereas repetition or restating the ungrammatical use of language was viewed as appropriate for lower proficiency level students.

The influence of student proficiency level in teacher practice has long been acknowledged in literature (Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Celce-Murcia, 1991; Mullock, 2006; Norris and Ortega, 2000). For example, there is “little justification in focusing on form” for Celce-Murcia (1991, p.463) if the learner is the beginner level. However, for upper proficiency level students “it may be well be necessary for the teachers to provide some form-related feedback and correction in order for the learners to progress” (p.463). As seen above, teacher statements are in sync with Celce-Murcia’s suggestions.

Teacher Perception of Student-Demonstrated Needs

Student needs or teachers’ perceptions of what students needed stimulated teachers’ grammar teaching decision-making substantially. Participants stated that they recognized students’ needs and deficiencies mainly through student writing or student responses during teaching episodes. Responses from teaching episodes were typically either in the form of question or demonstration of an error. One of the secondary teachers’ comments illuminates this point:

If I see an error on and on and if it is something that we have covered previously, then I focus on it more. As an additional lesson and extra worksheets (T4).

This quote also brings out another teacher consideration: teachers’ focus on a misunderstood grammatical feature when the error is one that was addressed previously, in other words, an error the students should be able to recognize and correct themselves. Teacher decision-making regarding grammar teaching based on similar occurrences (regarding the ways to address student errors) were also captured in Basturkmen et al. (2004) and Ellis et al. (2002). Teachers’ appropriate responses to the challenges that the students are experiencing are found to be beneficial in student uptake.

This study also shows teacher’s preference for arranging their grammar-related lessons according to errors that were common across student writing samples. Teachers’ preference for impromptu grammar teaching that was triggered by students’ queries (67.2 %) also allude to this factor. However, we also concluded that, as a result of the 43.1% neutral rate for *Q16: I prefer impromptu grammar teaching aroused by students’ queries*, teachers might prefer dealing with grammatical elements of language either at the time of the need, such as when students made errors due to a lack of linguistic knowledge, or when a particular linguistic feature was the target of the lesson. One of the teachers’ comments reinforced this point:

T 7: I believe grammar instruction works best when it is tailored to the needs of individuals as evidenced by their performances.

Teacher appreciation of student questions related to grammar and teacher inclination towards preparing their lessons prompted by student initiation has been evident in previous research (Basturkmen et al., 2004). In addition, the value of addressing questions that are raised by the students is treasured (Ellis et al., 2002) because such questions speed the process of understanding and learning. Moreover, the teachers seemed to be aware of this positive impact of student-initiated questions on learners’ uptake as suggested by the high agreement rate with *Q16 (I prefer impromptu grammar teaching aroused by students’ queries in the moment)*.

On the other hand, some of the participants recognized the influence that English proficiency level had on students when initiating or failing to initiate a query, with lower proficiency students less likely because of their limited English skills to ask grammar questions.

One teacher commented that lower level students asked questions, “on rare occasions”. “They [low level students] don’t ask grammar questions”, she explicitly added. Developmentally, some young learners, teachers noted, were simply not able to ask metalinguistic or abstract questions about English grammar. In these circumstances, teachers dealt with the grammar “at the needed point in the process” (T47), meaning teachers only addressed the grammar feature if it was directly related to the objectives in the lesson plan.

This research study allows us to better understand ‘big picture’ factors that shape teacher choices of instruction type during grammar teaching, that is, those factors that many of the teachers in the study nominated as influential. However, one of the factors that seemed to be missing in teacher statements or comments was the school district’s requirements for ESL instruction. This district, like all in the state of the study, participated in a standardized English language assessment of all ELLs in order to gauge ELLs’ adequate yearly progress (as mandated by the U.S. Department of Education). It is, perhaps, curious that this standardized, high stakes test and the district’s ELL rubrics (district level guidelines for ELL instruction) were not mentioned by any participants. This may be explained, however, by survey methodology, which did not specifically question participants on these two topics (the standardized exam and the district rubrics). Additional insights might be found in further qualitative study of the district ELL teachers, which involve multiple sources of data such as classroom observations and interviews. Certainly, such a study has the potential to yield deeper, thick description of the teachers’ thinking regarding good grammar instruction. While this study helped identify K-12 ESL teachers’ strong feel for grammar teaching and the skill areas they prefer emphasizing the grammar points, students’ perspectives are missing. To our knowledge the relationship between teacher and learner perspectives related to grammar teaching is under-researched. Further studies can be administered to explore student perspective to fill this void in literature.

CONCLUSION

How can we best help our students achieve grammar competency? Should we teach grammar explicitly or implicitly? Should we integrate grammar in a meaningful context? These are the kind of questions that language teachers face on a daily basis to make decisions about their instructions. We know that teachers’ decisions are based on their beliefs and consequently teachers’ beliefs are the primary factors in their grammar teaching as well (Andrews, 2001; Andrews, 2003; Borg, 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2001, 2006; Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Farrell & Lim, 2005; Richards et al., 2001; Shultz, 2001). This study has endeavored to make some of those beliefs and ensuing practices explicit.

In addition, scholars and researchers offer varying methods and information about grammar instruction, namely Form-Focused Instruction (Ellis et al., 2001, 2002; Loewen, 2005; Spada & Lightbown, 2008; Ellis, 2012). However, there is no consensus among them pertaining to the effectiveness of one method over another (Ellis et al., 2006; Ellis, 2006; Nassaji & Fatos, 2010), and for a good reason. Teaching is a context-embedded social activity that requires teachers to reason through what ‘good’ teaching means for each group of students each day. At the same time, teacher education institutions ought to provide ESL teacher candidates sufficient information on the various methodological options that are out there so that teachers will have lots of tools in their instructional toolkit. We are aware that some colleges do offer courses that involve grammar teaching pedagogy, addressing how and when to intervene. We see it as necessary for the teachers to be aware of these existing approaches and rationales behind them in order to make informed decisions about grammar instruction in their own classrooms.

We need to add that the K-12 ESL teachers in this study seemed to be aware that there is not one way of teaching grammar. They recognized that there were options to choose from when it came to grammar instruction and that such choices were made according to their judgments based on the circumstances such as student need and proficiency level. With this study, we now have a clearer picture of what factors teachers rely on when making decisions about when and how to instruct English grammar.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the ESL teachers in the district who devoted their precious time to participate in this research study, the three anonymous reviewers, and the editors of AWP for their helpful suggestions.

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APPENDIX A

PART 1

Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Please circle your choice.

Strongly Agree 1	Agree 2	Neutral 3	Disagree 4	Strongly Disagree 5
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- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Grammar is essential in communication | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. Grammar is essential in writing | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. Grammar should be taught isolated from context | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. Grammar should be integrated with content | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. Grammar should be taught explicitly | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. Students will grasp the idea eventually; there is no need to teach grammar explicitly. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. There are times when certain grammatical rules should be taught explicitly | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. Students' errors should be corrected immediately | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. If the errors don't interfere with the meaning, correction is unnecessary | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. Unless the students ask, there is no need for any correction | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. Explicit grammar teaching will increase students' progress | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. Explicit grammar teaching is effective with upper level students | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. Explicit grammar teaching is effective with lower level students | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. Pulling students' attention to form in language is necessary | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. I prefer pre-planned grammar teaching | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. I prefer impromptu grammar teaching aroused by students' queries in the moment | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

- Please add any further comments you wish to make about grammar teaching.

PART 2

Q. What might you do when students make the following errors (as underlined)? Please indicate IF you would correct the error and, if so, how you might correct it for a typical student in your classes.

1. Student: I go to school yesterday.
Teacher:

2. St: I don't like eating a snake (snack) before dinner.
T:

PART 3

Q. Please, provide your comments;

1. What do you understand form-focused instruction to mean?

2. To what extent do you consider yourself knowledgeable of English grammar?
 Completely mostly somewhat not at all

3. Have you ever had the experience of not being able to provide an appropriate answer to a student question related to grammar?
 Yes No Sometimes

4. Which of the followings do you attribute your teaching pedagogy to?

My learning experience formal teacher education both
 other(.....)

PART 4

Demographic Information:

Which of the following age categories describe you?

20-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 60 +

Gender: M F

How long have you been teaching ESL?

What levels of ESL do you teach?

What percentage of your teaching time do you spend for on tasks in the following areas:

listening, speaking, reading and writing?

What is your initial area of certification?

Have you ever taken a course related to language teaching instructional strategies? If yes, please describe?

Thank you for your cooperation.