

Voice of Academia

Academic Series of Universiti Teknologi MARA Kedah

VoA 2024
Volume 20 Issue 1

ISSN: : 1985-5079

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e-ISSN: 2682-7840



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IN-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS' BELIEFS OF GRAMMAR TEACHING AT PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN SELANGOR, MALAYSIA.

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received April 2023

Accepted Nov 2023

Published Jan 2024

Keywords:

Grammar teaching,
Teachers' belief, Implicit,
Explicit, In-service teachers.

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ABSTRACT

The study of English teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching has been subjected to many discussions and empirical research in second language education. The issue of whether grammar should be taught or otherwise is not the only concern, but also some teachers encounter the issue of the best way to teach grammar, either teaching grammar explicitly or implicitly. This paper reports on a study which investigated the beliefs of in-service English teachers at primary schools in Selangor, Malaysia about the importance of the grammar component in learning English and its roles in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) as well as the approaches to grammar teaching either explicit or implicit. For this study, the researcher employed a quantitative approach and randomly selected 50 in-service English teachers to obtain information regarding teachers' views of grammar teaching and classroom. The findings revealed that most of the in-service English teachers believed that the grammar component is significant in learning the English language and it should be taught at primary schools. In addition, the study found that most of them preferred to employ the implicit approach compared to the explicit approach in grammar teaching. Hence, it can be concluded that the teachers in the study had their own set of beliefs about grammar teaching. The involvement of various stakeholders such as ESL teachers, curriculum designers in ESL, and the Malaysia Ministry of Education plays essential roles to enhance the English

education system and support pupils' achievement, especially at the primary school level.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of different language teaching approaches and methods over the years have placed different emphasis on grammar language teaching. Numerous previous studies have shown that teachers have different views about English grammar teaching. Teachers' beliefs appear to influence teaching practices and teachers' instructional decisions (Johnson, 1994 as cited in Farrell & Lim, 2005). It means that the teachers' views can shape their beliefs about English grammar teaching, which will subsequently influence their grammar instructional decisions. They may have different reasons in choosing contents, emphasizing, and selecting different ways of teaching grammar and different modes of learning (Rohani, 2007). On top of that, there is a need to understand the underlying beliefs of English teachers about the importance of the grammar component in learning English and its role in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) as well as the approaches used in grammar teaching to enhance the English language teaching practices and teacher education programs.

Although a great number of studies have been carried out in relation to English teachers' beliefs of grammar and classroom practices in the field of second language (L2) teaching, little research studies are currently known about in-service English teachers' beliefs of grammar teaching and approaches to English grammar teaching. Therefore, the current study seeks to fill an important gap in the existing research literature by investigating in-service English teachers' belief of grammar teaching and approaches to grammar teaching at primary schools in the state of Selangor, Malaysia.

1.1 Research Objectives

The research objectives are:

1. To identify the Malaysia primary school in Selangor, English teachers' beliefs about the importance of grammar in learning English and its role in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL).
2. To identify the Malaysia primary school in Selangor English teachers' beliefs about the approaches to grammar teaching (explicit or implicit).

2. Literature Review

The teaching of grammar can be defined as guiding students to understand grammar concepts by teaching how English works (e.g: the organizing principles of a linguistic communication system) as well as particulars" (Azar, 2007). Some researchers and academicians considered the teaching of grammar unnecessary. A few researchers acknowledged that some English teachers do not focus much on grammar teaching in the English classrooms since the

advent of communicative language teaching (Nemah, 2012; Wang, 2010). Moreover, Nemah (2012) claimed that there was no correlation between the teaching of grammar and acquiring grammar among students because students could develop their grammatical competence and acquire grammar naturally in a fluency-oriented environment by interacting in the classroom without focus on language forms.

On the other hand, other researchers stated that grammar is vital in language learning, and they stressed the significance of teaching English grammar formally and its role in the ESL and EFL countries (Nemah, 2012; Wang, 2010; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Lim, 2005). Grammar teaching is essential to show how language works and guide students how to use the language correctly. When students acquire grammar knowledge and skills, they could be aware of a particular grammatical structure such as verbs and nouns, hence they can better understand and use the grammatical concept to combine words to form sentences competently (Mart, 2013).

The use of an explicit approach in grammar teaching features teacher's rules explanations, examples of how the new structure is used followed by practice exercises (Adair-Hauck, Donato, Q Cumo-Johanssen, 2005 as cited in Haight, Herron & Cole, 2007). Some teachers expressed that a more explicit approach to grammar teaching is effective in promoting language learning (Hulstijn & Graff, 1994; Ellis, 1997; Chastain, 1988 cited in Zhong, 2005). They believed that giving explanations to students about grammar rules overtly can help students to understand what they are practicing and enhance the accuracy of the language. According to Hudson and Walmsley (2005), "explicit instruction is an important part of grammar-teaching and is easier if the pupils already have some understanding of how their first language works". Also, in the explicit instruction, students consciously learn the targeted form which enables a student to describe a rule of grammar (Tutunis, 2012).

Meanwhile, an implicit instruction requires learners to infer how a form works without awareness (Ellis, 2005). The teachers provide the rules and meanings in examples, but the teachers do not explain grammar rules, they only guide the students in a process of discovering the language (Woods, 1995 as cited in Graham, 2011). Numerous researchers revealed that students perform better in implicit induction than explicit induction. In a "New Perspectives on Grammar Teaching in Second Language Classroom" article published in 2002, Fotos (2002) explained that the use of implicit approach in grammar instruction is good, but it depends on students' sufficient opportunities to interact in class and much exposure outside of class. Krashen (1985) suggests the most effective method to improve grammatical accuracy without conscious learning is through sufficient meaningful communicative activities such as role-play, problem-solving and others (cited in Zhong, 2005).

3. Methodology

This study is a quantitative-method research design. The questionnaires consisted of 21 questions that were handed out to 50 in-service English teachers from eight randomly selected primary schools in Selangor to obtain data about teachers' beliefs of grammar teaching and classroom practices. The researcher developed a detailed description of each English teacher's beliefs on the importance of grammar in English learning and its role in teaching ESL, how grammar should be taught, teaching approaches and strategies that English teachers use and then make a comparison on teachers' similarities and differences.

During the administration, the researcher met the survey respondents and answered any questions regarding the questionnaire if they had any to avoid misunderstandings. The survey respondents completed the questionnaires at home and returned them back to the researcher during the next visit. Responses from questionnaires were recorded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20.0. The calculation of the frequencies, percentages and mean scores were listed in tables respectively.

4. Results

4.1 Teachers' Beliefs about the Importance of Grammar Component in Learning English and its Role in Teaching ESL

With respect to Table 1, most of the survey respondents stated that the grammar component is truly important in learning English language, and it should be taught at primary school English class with the mean score 4.48 and standard deviation of .677 (47 of them, i.e. 94%). Meanwhile, 41 (82%) survey respondents agree that grammar should be the main component of an English language course (M=4.00, SD=.969). The statement on it is important to focus on grammar in all English lessons causes a bit of discord (M=3.74, SD=.965), although many survey respondents agree with this statement.

Table 1.
Statements on the Importance of Grammar Component in English Language Learning and Its Role in Teaching ESL

Statements	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)
Grammar is important in learning the English language and it should be taught in primary school English class.	94	4	2	4.48	.677
Grammar should be the main component of an English language teaching course.	82	10	8	4.00	.969
It is important to focus on grammar in all English lessons.	72	14	14	3.74	.965

Scale: (0-2.99 = Disagree; 3.0-3.49 = Neutral; 3.5-5.0 = Agree) Total=4.07

4.2 Teachers' Beliefs about the Approaches to Grammar Teaching (Explicit or Implicit).

The data in Table 2 indicates that most of the survey respondents agree on the statements of explicit approach. 34 (68%) of the survey respondents agree on the statement that teachers

should begin a grammar lesson by explaining how separate structures work (M=3.72, SD=.882). The statement of the main role of the teacher in a grammar lesson is to explain the new grammar rule, with the high proportion of survey respondents (M=3.98, SD=.769) expressing an agreed opinion. Also, most of the survey respondents agreed that drills and memorization are very useful to learn and teach grammar (M=4.20, SD=.728). Generally, the high mean values between 3.72 and 4.20 present that survey respondents believe the explicit approach is to be applied in the classroom. But, the mean value 3.04 for the statement of grammar should be taught separately, not integrated with other English skills such as speaking and writing show that the survey respondents find the separate grammar teaching without integrating with other skills of less desirability in the classrooms, there is a high standard deviation for this statement (SD=1.245), this can say that survey respondents are not on the same page when it comes to applying separate grammar teaching. Overall, the total mean score of the statements on the explicit approach is 3.75, this should indicate high agreement of the survey respondents on the explicit approach.

Table 2.
Statements on the Explicit Approach

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)
Teachers should begin a grammar lesson by explaining how separate structures work.	68	20	12	3.72	.882
The main role of the teacher in a grammar lesson is to explain the new grammar rule.	86	6	8	3.98	.769
Drills and memorization are very useful exercises to learn and teach grammar.	90	6	4	4.20	.728
Grammar should be taught separately, not integrated with other English skills such as reading and writing.	50	8	42	3.04	1.245
Scale: (0-2.99 = Disagree; 3.0-3.49 = Neutral; 3.5-5.0 = Agree)				Total: 3.75	

The data in Table 3 indicates that most of the survey respondents agree on all statements except for one statement which is grammar is best taught incidentally. The mean value 3.18 for the statement on grammar is best taught incidentally shows that the survey respondents surveyed find the teaching grammar incidentally of mediocre desirability in the classroom. There is a high standard deviation of the statement on grammar is best taught incidentally which means that survey respondents are not on the same page when it comes to applying the implicit approach. However, the survey results indicate that more than half of the survey respondents (46 of them, i.e. 92%) with the mean score 4.16 with standard deviation of .548 agreed that a major part of a grammar lesson should involve students in practicing structures and forty seven (94%) agreed that pupils can improve their grammatical accuracy through regular practice of structures (M=4.36, SD=.598). Additionally, a very big percentage of the survey respondents (46 of them, i.e. 92%) agree

that statement grammar can be taught along with communication-oriented activities in primary school English teaching with the mean score 4.24 and standard deviation of .657.

Table 3.
Statements on the Implicit Approach

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)
Grammar is best taught incidentally (i.e. there is no need to pre-plan grammar lessons).	48	20	32	3.18	1.10
The major part of a grammar lesson should involve students in practicing structures.	92	8	0	4.16	.548
Pupils can improve their grammatical accuracy through regular practice of structures.	94	6	0	4.36	.598
Grammar can be taught along with communication-oriented activities in primary school English teaching.	92	6	2	4.24	.657

Scale: (0-2.99 = Disagree; 3.0-3.49 = Neutral; 3.5-5.0 = Agree) Total: 3.99

In general, the high mean values between 3.74 and 4.48 in Table 1 shows that survey respondents believe grammar is essential in learning the English language thus it should be taught in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL), particularly in Malaysia primary schools. The total mean score of the statements is 4.07, this should indicate high agreement of the survey respondents on the importance of the grammar component in English language learning and its role in teaching ESL. It is likely that the finding can be explained with reference to the benefits of grammar teaching in improving accuracy and fluency of the spoken and written language (Zhong, 2005; Nasaqji & Fotos, 2004). Nassaji and Fotos (2004) also pointed out that grammar teaching helps language learners to explore the nature of language, thereby enhancing their accuracy in using the language. Thus, the teachers in this study may believe that grammar teaching can help pupils in improving their language proficiency and accuracy, therefore pupils can use the language accurately.

Even though grammar is seen as one of the building blocks of language learning, there is a high standard of deviation (M=3.74, SD=.965) for the statement of focusing on grammar in all English lessons. The survey respondents are not on the same page when it comes to the idea of focusing on grammar in all English lessons. This finding is in harmony with the previous finding (eg: Nemah, 2012). It is possible that survey respondents have varied opinions relating to the idea of focusing on grammar in all English lessons due to some factors such as the prescribed English curriculum syllabus, time constraints and high stakes examination.

Meanwhile, based on the findings, the total mean score for statements on the implicit approach is 3.99 (see Table 3), which is higher than the total mean score for statements on the explicit approach, 3.75 (see Table 2). This indicates that the survey respondents were in high agreement with the implicit approach compared to the explicit approach. Thus, the survey respondents seemed to prefer the implicit approach in grammar teaching, which contradicts the result found by Voolen, Cateleyn and Mottart (2012).

Although the above discussion revealed that survey respondents show high agreement with the implicit approach to grammar teaching, the majority of the survey respondents ($M=3.98$, $SD=.769$) agreed that teachers play the main role in a grammar lesson by explaining the grammar rules to pupils. This finding reinforces the explanation offered by Ghabanchi (2010), "explicit knowledge can teach learners how to acquire implicit knowledge", which means that if learners have background knowledge of grammatical rules and understand them in a separate lesson, they will be more likely to notice the grammatical rules when they are listening or reading in such communication-oriented activities.

The result from the questionnaire also illustrates that half survey respondents found the separate grammar teaching without integrating with other skills of less desirability in the classrooms ($M=3.04$, $SD=1.245$), they prefer to integrate grammar teaching in a meaningful communicative context. This finding is in harmony with previous research (eg: Zhong, 2005). The researcher investigated the teachers' beliefs of integrating grammar instruction in a meaningful communicative context. The finding illustrated that methods for integrating grammar instruction with communicative language learning enable students to recognize target grammar features in context and develop students' accuracy, thus improving their communicative abilities. This finding also in line with the result in the present study (see Table 3), as discussed before which revealed that survey respondents show high agreement in implicit approach to grammar teaching.

6. Conclusion

It can be concluded that most of the teachers in the present study have their own set of beliefs about grammar teaching. Learning grammar is important especially for ESL pupils in Malaysia and it should be taught at primary level which enables pupils to learn basic grammar so that pupils can communicate in English correctly and accurately. Besides, teachers also have different views about approaches that can be applied in grammar teaching. Therefore, understanding teachers' beliefs of grammar teaching is vital because this can shed light for teachers to reflect upon themselves to enhance their grammar teaching practices.

The involvement of various stakeholders such as ESL teachers, curriculum designers in ESL and the Malaysia Ministry of Education play crucial roles to enhance the English education system and support pupils' achievement. The Ministry of Education should provide in-service English teachers with more teachers' training through teacher development programmes to expose them to approaches to grammar teaching or other teaching techniques, thus they will realize and perhaps practice the current approaches or grammar teaching strategies in their grammar lessons.

Besides, course designers need to consider a vast array of beliefs that teachers expressed regarding the importance of grammar components in language learning, its role in teaching ESL and the approaches preferences to grammar teaching. The findings will give guidance for them to design materials that meet teachers' preferences concerning grammar teaching.

There are numerous recommendations for future research. Firstly, other studies like the present study could be carried out at other primary schools in other states in Malaysia to look for similarities and differences of teachers' beliefs about the importance of grammar component in learning English and its role in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) as well as the approaches to grammar teaching (implicit or explicit). This opportunity will help the other researchers to compare the findings with other primary schools to have wider views among English teachers and search for approaches to best suit pupils' needs and interests.

Moreover, other studies can be expanded at other different levels of education institutions such as secondary school and university. The findings can be used by other researchers to look for another view of beliefs from different levels of institutions and how participants respond to the importance of grammar teaching and approaches for grammar teaching and learning.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my appreciation to my dedicated supervisor, Associate Professor Dr. Izaham Shah Ismail for his continual guidance and feedback throughout my journey. I would not have been able to complete my work without his guidance. Additionally, I thank my friends at the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam branch for their support and patience as I finished my research. Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to my family for their encouragement during the many years involved in this endeavour. Thank you for all they have done throughout my life.

Funding Details

None

Authors Contributions

The author has contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest associated with this publication.

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ISSN: : 1985-5079