Teachers’ theories in grammar teaching

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This paper considers how research into teachers’ theories in English language teaching (ELT) can enhance our understanding of instruction, and provide the basis of effective teacher development (TD) work. The nature of teachers’ theories is illustrated with examples from classroom research on grammar teaching. A TD strategy through which teachers examine the theories underlying their own work in teaching grammar is also outlined, together with materials to assist teachers in implementing this strategy.

In recent years, educational research has revealed the powerful influence of teachers’ theories on their instructional decisions. These theories often consist of implicit personal understandings of teaching and learning which teachers develop through educational and professional experiences in their lives. With specific reference to ELT, insight into teachers’ theories has been provided by studies such as Burns (1992), who focused on the teaching of writing, and Woods (1996), who examined teachers’ planning processes. This research, too, has revealed strong links between teachers’ theories and their classroom practice.

Teachers’ theories

Teachers’ theories are particularly useful in enabling teachers to cope in instructional contexts which are ill-defined. In ELT, grammar teaching clearly constitutes such an ill-defined domain: the role of formal instruction itself has been a perennial area of debate, and more than 20 years of research have failed to yield firm guidelines for grammar teaching methodology (see Ellis 1994). The study of how teachers make sense of the many uncertainties that surround grammar teaching is thus fruitful terrain for examining the nature of teachers’ theories in ELT.

A study

I recently conducted such a study with five teachers of English as a foreign language in Malta, whom I observed teaching, and interviewed about the grammar teaching practices in their lessons. Given the practical orientation of teachers’ theories, these five teachers were encouraged to make explicit the theories underlying their work by commenting on specific instructional events in their lessons, for example, rather than by filling out a questionnaire, or talking about their theories without any reference to their actual practices.

This study provides the basis of the remainder of this paper. I will first outline and discuss two teachers’ understandings of two respective issues in formal instruction. On the basis of these examples, which illustrate the nature of teachers’ theories in grammar teaching, I then consider the
implications of such theories for research and TD in ELT. In the final part of the paper I outline a TD strategy through which teachers can research the theories underlying their own grammar teaching practices.

The role of formal instruction

The first issue in teaching grammar I want to consider here concerns the role which such work actually plays in second and foreign language learning. Eric’s work provides insight into teachers’ theories about this issue. In his work with intermediate learners, he included opportunities for formal instruction in every lesson. His dominant strategy was to take note of students’ errors during oral fluency activities, and to feed these notes back to the class for subsequent analysis, discussion, and self-correction. In discussing grammar, he also encouraged students to compare English grammar with that of their first language. He generally provided oral practice activities following the analysis of grammar. In investigating the personal theories underlying these practices, I asked Eric what contribution he felt formal instruction made to his work:

I’m not entirely convinced that any focus on accuracy in the classroom has any effect on students’ fluency in general. I’m trying not to exclude the possibility, perhaps the probability, that formal language focus at some point gets transferred into language which is acquired by the student ... I don’t necessarily believe that it’s going to help them. I’ve done this present perfect umpteen times with a million people. I still believe that nothing I’ve ever done in a classroom consciously with students, language focus, has actually helped them to acquire the present perfect, for example.

Despite Eric’s views here, grammar work was an intrinsic aspect of his teaching, and through our discussions of his work, he articulated a clear rationale for his position. This can be summarized as follows:

- Students expect grammar work. Formal instruction addresses these expectations, and eases the concerns students would develop in the absence of such work.

- Grammar work based on the errors students make during fluency activities validates such activities in the students’ eyes, and encourages initially reluctant students to accept these activities more enthusiastically.

- Students like to be made aware of their errors. Grammar teaching creates this awareness, which also improves students’ ability to monitor and self-correct their use of language.

- Grammar work allows for variation in lesson pace and, within the context of high-energy, interactive learning, provides students with some quiet, reflective time.

- An awareness of patterns in English grammar facilitates students’ understanding of the way the language works.

- Making students aware of parallels and contrasts between English grammar and that of their first language often allows them to

Simon Borg
understand the grammar under study more rapidly. It also makes students aware of the source of foreign language errors caused by first language interference.

- Grammar practice consolidates students' understanding of grammar and provides the teacher with diagnostic information about their needs.

Traditionally, the role of formal instruction in ELT has been assessed in terms of the contribution it makes to developing students' ability to use the language for communication. Eric's theory, however, illustrates that teachers' decisions in grammar teaching are not solely influenced by such considerations. He believed that analysing and practising grammar helped students make better sense of the workings of the language, but did not feel such work improved their ability to use the target grammar. Rather, grammar work for Eric mainly fulfilled what he called a 'packaging' function: it showed students that he was aware of their expectations and concerns, and hence created positive attitudes in them towards all aspects of his teaching.

A second issue in formal instruction that has attracted much research is whether grammar is best learnt through a process of discovery, or whether expository teaching provides better results (e.g. Shaffer 1989). Tina's work provides insight into a teacher's perspective on this issue. In teaching advanced students, she utilized grammar discovery activities from Hall and Shepheard (1991); however, she also delivered mini lectures on aspects of grammar such as the syntax of multi-word verbs. In our discussions of her work, she identified a number of reasons for this pedagogical variability. These are summarized in Figure 1 below.
From her experiences as a learner, as well as from her professional training, Tina believed that learning by discovery work was more effective than learning by being told. However, she also felt that students expected some expository work, and that not all grammar lent itself to or warranted the time and effort involved in discovery. Thus, she approached the present perfect simple through discovery, but gave a mini lecture on the syntactic properties of multi-word verbs. She explained how these different grammar areas merited different strategies as follows:

... the use of the present perfect, where a fairly complex thinking and selection procedure is involved. The ideas are quite difficult to grasp and lend themselves well to discovery activities. 'Is this the present perfect or past simple?' is a choice students are going to have to make fairly often, whereas ‘What type of phrasal verb is this?’ isn’t so important. They [multi-word verbs] were very simple, I thought, and I thought that it would have been a complete waste of time to have done it in any other way.

In addition, Tina’s decision to opt for expository work was often shaped by contextual factors: discovery work consumed much valuable classroom time, and she did not always think this was justified, especially in the students’ eyes. Discovery work also called for more planning on her part, for which time was not always available.

Tina’s decisions about discovery and exposition in grammar teaching were thus influenced by a set of interacting thoughts about pedagogical ideals, instructional content, students, and context. Insight into these factors greatly clarifies our understanding of this teacher’s work. In particular, it enables us to make sense of the presence in her teaching of what had traditionally been mutually exclusive instructional strategies. Grammar teaching emerges clearly here as a complex decision-making process, rather than the unthinking application of a best method.

**Implications**

The examples I have discussed here illustrate only two of a range of problematic questions teachers must deal with in teaching grammar. However, these examples clearly indicate that an awareness of teachers’ theories can enhance our understanding of the nature of formal instruction. This has two implications, for research and TD in ELT respectively:

1. The psychological bases of grammar teaching merit further research. Despite the recent growth of studies of teachers’ theories in ELT, formal instruction has received little attention (see, however, Borg 1998, Mitchell, Brumfit, and Hooper 1994). Data about teachers’ practices and theories are needed, particularly by teacher educators, who at present typically introduce trainees to pedagogical options in grammar teaching without being able to illustrate when, how, and why teachers in real classrooms draw upon these options. Research into teachers’ theories addresses this problem by providing teacher
educators with detailed ‘authentic’ accounts of teacher thinking and action.

2 A second implication here is that given the impact of teachers’ theories on their work, as well as contemporary concerns with the role of reflection in TD, becoming aware of their personal theories is clearly central to teachers’ growth as professionals. Teachers can thus benefit from TD initiatives that stimulate this process of awareness-raising, and in the rest of this paper I outline such an initiative, with specific reference to grammar teaching.

**Exploring teachers’ theories**

The strategy I describe here consists of three stages: (a) describing classroom practices, (b) making explicit the rationales for these practices, and (c) evaluating these rationales. Teachers may work through these stages individually or they may engage in co-operative TD work in which colleagues support each other in the investigative processes I describe here.

**Describing classroom practice**

Teachers wishing to explore their personal theories in grammar teaching must start by obtaining descriptive data about their work. The options available to teachers for doing so are well-documented (e.g. Richards and Lockhart 1994) and I need not repeat them here; I simply want to stress that teachers’ theories, as a form of practical knowledge, cannot be examined without reference to what actually goes on in the classroom. However, familiarity with their own practices, and the proceduralized nature of much professional behaviour may impair teachers’ ability to discern anything noteworthy in these descriptions of their work. In such cases, teachers’ reflective efforts can be enhanced by an awareness of the kinds of questions they might apply to their data. A list of such questions is presented in Appendix 1.

There are two points to make regarding the use of this schedule:

1 I became aware of and explored these questions through my work with five teachers over some 75 hours of observations and 15 hours of interviews. Individual teachers, then, should not expect to investigate all of these issues on the basis of one or two grammar lessons. Rather, they should, through recurrent phases of data collection and analysis, focus on those issues that are of interest and/or relevance to their teaching situation.

2 An obvious point, but one worth restating, is that in answering these questions teachers must distinguish between their actual practices and what they believe they do. David, another teacher in my study, was adamant that he never used students’ first language; it was only when I gave him transcripts of his lessons that he realized how often he actually did. Thus it is vital that teachers’ focus here be on establishing, with factual support, their actions in teaching grammar.

**Identifying a rationale**

When teachers have described what they do during formal instruction, they need to consider the rationale for their practices. The basic
question here is why? Why do my grammar lessons always follow the same format? Why do I regularly tell students not to worry about their grammar errors? Why did I provide plenty of practice in one lesson, but very little in another? Such questions encourage teachers to consider the influence on their decisions in grammar work of a wide range of factors. To assist teachers in examining these factors, I present the task in Appendix 2. Both the sample reasons and the list of underlying influences identified here are taken from my study.

The task aims to facilitate teachers’ reflections in two ways: (a) it provides examples of the kinds of statements about their work teachers should be aiming to develop, and (b) it highlights a range of assumptions and perceptions which underlie the reasons teachers give for their decisions in teaching grammar. An awareness of these potential, often tacit, influences on their thinking and teaching may thus enable teachers to account more effectively for their own practices. Teachers may extend this task by constructing schematic representations, such as the one I presented in Figure 1, which illustrate the way their decisions in teaching grammar are interactively shaped by different underlying influences.

**Evaluating theories**

The final stage in the TD strategy I am outlining here is the evaluation of teachers’ theories. Appendix 3 aims to clarify the nature of this challenging task for teachers in two ways: (a) it reassures them that their goal is not to establish whether their theories are right or wrong (we lack the indisputable knowledge of language learning which would permit such judgements, anyway); and (b) it outlines, with specific reference to grammar teaching, the kinds of evaluative questions teachers may apply to the thinking behind their work. Using examples from my study, I will briefly illustrate how such questions can facilitate teachers’ evaluations of their work.

*Have I articulated clear reasons for my instructional decisions?*

Martha, who regularly assigned controlled grammar practice, was unable to explicate her reasons for doing so beyond saying that it is ‘better to have some kind of practice than no practice at all’. Her reasons for conducting such practice, therefore, were not well-developed. In evaluating their personal theories, teachers can benefit by identifying aspects of their thinking which reflect this kind of uncertainty or vagueness, and make them the focus of further TD work.

*Are there any inconsistencies in the views I have articulated?*

Teachers should examine their views for evidence of inconsistency (e.g. contradictory beliefs) and, where this is found, seek to probe the issues involved in order to reach a deeper, more coherent understanding of their position. Tina’s beliefs in the value of both discovery and expository learning, for example, presented an initially paradoxical position that only made sense in the light of a deeper analysis of the range of factors which influenced her thinking. Instances of seemingly irreconcilable contradictions which teachers identify in their views will provide a particularly important focus for further reflection.

Simon Borg
What influences have promoted the development of these views?
Eric had initially been trained never to use grammatical terminology. However, as a result of further professional education and classroom experience he had radically changed his views on this issue. Examining the sources of their theories adds to teachers' awareness of their professional development, and may also indicate key episodes in their past which influence—sometimes negatively—their current practices. My work with David illustrates this point: he kept grammar work to a minimum mainly to avoid the recurrence of a traumatic situation early in his career, where one of his students had asked him a grammar question he was unable to answer. Bringing this factor out into the open encouraged David to consider ways of improving his own knowledge of grammar, and hence his confidence in teaching it.

Are there alternative positions I can consider?
Effective reflection also calls for the open-minded consideration of ideas that are not part of our current thinking. Therefore, in evaluating their theories, teachers should consider why these do not allow for certain instructional options. Hanna, for example, hardly ever volunteered grammatical terminology in her work; written grammar practice also figured minimally in the classes given by all five teachers. Teachers who examine what they do not do may come to expand their current instructional repertoire by incorporating strategies they had previously dismissed, perhaps without sufficient consideration. Considering alternatives in this way can also be beneficial when teachers feel that contextual factors beyond their control (e.g. prescribed coursebooks) preclude them from teaching in a manner they would prefer. In such cases, the evaluation of their theories calls on teachers to (a) honestly examine whether this perceived impact is as inevitable as it appears to be, and (b) to consider instructional adjustments, no matter how slight, which will allow them to teach in a manner more in tune with their pedagogical ideals.

Conclusion
Although illustrated with specific reference to grammar teaching, the ideas I have presented here are relevant to our field in general. Continued research on teachers' theories can enrich our understandings of all aspects of ELT. In addition, TD work informed by such research can enable teachers to explore their own theories, and to examine the many experiential, psychological, and contextual factors which shape their practices. TD initiatives such as these, grounded in the study of actual classroom practices, are likely to be particularly sensitive to teachers' needs, credible in teachers' eyes, and effective in encouraging teachers to reflect on their work. Relating research and TD in this manner also clearly forges stronger links between these two facets of ELT.

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Notes
1 Pseudonyms are used throughout here. As always, my thanks to the teachers who participated in this study.
2 All the teachers in this study worked with students from Western European countries.
3 Starting from 'Language is a ... make sense of' and moving clockwise, the corresponding assumptions/perceptions here are d, c, a, b, g, f, e, i, and h.

References

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Appendix 1

Step 1
How do you teach grammar?

The following questions are based on a study of the decisions teachers make in teaching grammar. These questions may help you to think about the decisions you make, and enable you to describe more effectively your own approach to grammar work.

Content
- What language points do I focus on in grammar work?
- How much time do I dedicate to grammar teaching?

Materials
- What are the sources of the grammar materials I use?

Lesson structure
- Do I sequence grammar teaching activities in any particular way(s)?
- Within the context of a whole lesson, at what stage(s) does grammar work occur?

Strategies
- Do I tell students we are doing grammar work, or do I keep it implicit?
- To what extent do I explain grammar? How? When?
- Do I refer to the students' first language in teaching grammar?
- To what extent do I encourage students to discover things for themselves? How?
- Do I encourage students to become aware of grammar rules? How? When?
- How much grammatical terminology do I/my materials use in teaching grammar?
- Do I provide students with opportunities to use grammar? How? When?

Outcomes
- Do the students have opportunities to keep a record of the grammar I cover?
- Do I check students' understanding of grammar? How? When?

Questions about grammar
- What kinds of questions about grammar do I ask the students?
- How do I respond to students' answers to these questions?
- Do I encourage students to ask questions about grammar?
- How do I respond to such questions?

Grammar errors
- How do I deal with students' spoken and written grammatical errors during accuracy and fluency work?
Appendix 2  Step 2

Why do you teach grammar the way you do?

Here are some reasons teachers actually gave for their decisions in teaching grammar.

- 'I choose grammar practice activities which focus on both the form and the meaning of the grammar under study.'
- 'Language is a chaotic mass of detail which grammar enables students to make sense of.'
- 'I normally bounce students’ questions about grammar back to the class, but when I’m unsure about the answers to these questions, I tend not to.'
- 'I avoid written grammar practice because it's not my job to do things students can work on alone, without a teacher.'
- 'I refrain from spoonfeeding students because they learn more from what they discover for themselves.'
- 'I generally prefer discovery work, but when students seem tired, I'm willing to be a bit more directive.'
- 'I never interrupt students when they make errors because it stops them from developing their fluency.'
- 'I'd like to do more discovery work, but suitable materials for advanced students are not readily available.'
- 'Students often feel comfortable with, and like to know, grammatical terminology. This needs to be respected.'
- 'I'd like to do more discovery work, but suitable materials for advanced students are not readily available.'
- 'I'd like to do more discovery work, but suitable materials for advanced students are not readily available.'

Underlying each of these reasons is a particular assumption about and/or perception of L2 teaching and learning. These are listed below. Can you match each one with its corresponding reason?

Teachers’ assumptions about and perceptions of
(a) their role in the classroom
(b) learning in general
(c) their own knowledge about grammar
(d) the nature of language
(e) constraints on their work (e.g. lack of resources)
(f) promoting and hindering language learning
(g) students’ moods and level of understanding at any time in the lesson
(h) grammar teaching activities
(i) students’ characteristics (e.g. expectations, preferences)

Now analyse the data you have collected about your work, and consider the reasons for your approach to grammar. In doing so, examine the assumptions about and perceptions of teaching and learning that underlie your views. Use the issues listed here as a starting point.
Step 3
Evaluating your views
Evaluating your reasons for your approach to teaching grammar does not mean deciding whether these are right or wrong. Rather, it asks you to consider issues such as the following:

- Have I articulated clear reasons for my instructional decisions? Are there any aspects of my work in teaching grammar I have not been able to explain well? If so, what can I do to clarify my understanding of the issue(s) involved?

- Are there any inconsistencies in the views I have articulated? If so, are there any factors influencing my work of which I am not yet aware, and which I need to examine in more depth?

- What influences have promoted the development of my current views about grammar teaching? Any particular educational or professional experiences?

- Are there alternative positions I can consider? Can I explore the potential in teaching grammar of instructional strategies which I currently ignore?