Teachers' Practices and Beliefs About Grammar Teaching

Kyonmi You

Nagasaki University

Even though grammar teaching plays a central role in most language classrooms, few investigations of teachers' beliefs and practices in grammar teaching have been conducted. Hence, our understanding of how teachers teach grammar and of the thinking informing their instructional decisions is still underdeveloped. This study was conducted with two language teachers who were teaching at a private English language institute in Hawaii. Using multiple data sources, I investigated how the teachers approach grammar in their classrooms and explored the beliefs behind their instructional decisions. Even though the teachers reported positive beliefs about communicative methods, they relied on traditional teaching methods for grammar in the classroom. The teachers' personal learning and teaching experiences were major factors in shaping their beliefs and eventually affected their practices in regards to grammar teaching.

文法指導は多くの場合、語学授業の中で中心的な役割を果たしている。しかしながら、文法指導や文法指導に対する教師の考え方に焦点を絞った研究は多くなく、結果、それらに対する私たちの理解は十分とはいえない。本研究は、ハワイにある私立の英語学校で教える、二人の語学教師を対象に行われた。複数のデータ収集方法を使って、文法の指導方法、文法指導に関する教師の考え方について調査し考察を行った。それにより、対象となった教師たちは、コミュニカティブな指導法について肯定的な反応を示していた。しかし、実際の文法指導においては伝統的な指導方法に頼っていた。また文法指導に関する考え方や実際の指導方法の形成には、教師自身の言語学習の経験や、それまでの教育経験が大きな影響を与えていることが明らかになった。

According to Ellis (2006), "There is now a clear conviction that a traditional approach to teaching grammar based on explicit explanations and drill-like practice is unlikely to result in the acquisition of the implicit knowledge needed for fluent and accurate communication" (p. 102). The majority of recent research reflects this view: Most researchers agree that communicative language teaching (CLT) should be a part of language lessons, with a goal of producing students who are able to communicate in the target language. However, many studies also have pointed out the difficulties of encouraging teachers to incorporate CLT into their everyday practices in the classroom. According to the findings, many Japanese teachers remain uncertain about what CLT is and are unsure about how to implement it in their classrooms (see Nishino, 2012). Some teachers seem to have a fragmented understanding about CLT (Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999; Thompson, 1996). According to Sato and Kleinsasser (1999), "a major challenge mentioned by many of the teachers pertained specifically to grammar instruction" (p. 513), although grammar teaching plays a central role in most language classrooms. In order to close the gap between the theoretical development of CLT and the response of language teachers, we need to know what is happening in the classroom. How do teachers approach grammar in their classrooms? What is the belief system supporting their decisions on grammar teaching?

Findings from empirical studies have presented several important issues on teacher beliefs especially about grammar teaching. First, teachers have potentially conflicting beliefs about L2 teaching and learning (Borg, 1998; Burns, 1992; Nishino, 2012). The results of these studies suggested that teachers believed in the value of explicit teaching and learning of grammar. On the other hand, they cared about spontaneous communication. Second, teachers' pedagogical beliefs are shaped by their own learning experiences (Borg, 1998; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999) and continue to develop through their teaching experiences, affecting their teaching practices (Borg, 1998; Nishino, 2012; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999). Teachers often persist with their initial belief system, regardless of whether or not they received teacher training in other teaching approaches, including CLT (Borg, 1998; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999). Third, teachers' pedagogical beliefs in regards to grammar are strongly affected by their own teaching contexts (Borg, 1998; Nishino, 2012). Nishino (2012) noted that in her study "teacher cognition [was] situated in their

own local contexts" (p. 392). That is, teachers' classroom practices were strongly affected by student conditions, such as English proficiency, motivation, and expectations.

Traditionally, grammar teaching has been conducted with the presentation and practice of discrete grammatical structures. Responding to Canale's definition of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980), researchers claimed that grammar teaching should be discussed with other components of communicative competence. Celce-Murcia (1991) stated that "it can no longer be viewed as a central, autonomous system to be taught and learned independent of meaning, social function, and discourse structure" (pp. 476-477). Larsen-Freeman (2001) suggested a pie chart as a guide for developing activities for teaching grammar. According to the chart, grammar consists of form, meaning, and use. All these three dimensions need to be mastered by learners, so that they are able to "use grammatical structures accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately" (p. 255). There is considerable theoretical agreement that focus-on-form instruction is better equipped to deal with this complexity of grammar (e.g., Long, 1991). According to Ellis (2006, 2008, 2015), focus-on-form instruction has learners "attend to form while engaged in meaning-focused language use" (Ellis, 2008, p. 827). In focus-on-form instruction, "the learner's attention is drawn precisely to a linguistic feature as necessitated by a communicative demand" (Doughty & Williams, 1998, p. 3). In addition, empirical studies reported that focus-on-form instruction enhanced not only Japanese students' linguistic competence, but also their communicative competence in English (Sato, Iwai, Kato, & Kushiro, 2009; Sato, Fukumoto, Ishitobi, & Morioka, 2012; Shintani, 2013).

Previous studies highlighted that meaning in use was critical in grammar teaching in order to improve overall communicative competence. However, research findings did not always influence practices in the classroom (Nishino, 2012; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999). As a result, grammar teaching remains traditional for the most part, with little impact from research findings (Larsen-Freeman, 2015). With these issues in mind, the aim of the current study was to investigate how teachers approach grammar in their work in the classroom and explore the rationale behind their instructional decisions. The research questions were as follows:

RQ1. What are the instructional practices in regards to grammar teaching?

RQ2. What are the teachers' beliefs underpinning their instructional practices in regards to grammar teaching?

RQ3. How did the teachers learn about grammar teaching?

Methods

Participants

The study was conducted in a private English language institute in Hawaii in 2017 with a group of advanced adult ESL students from Japan, China, and Thailand. They received 6 hours of instruction a day taking four courses, typically spending 6 to 12 months at the school. The class size was restricted to fewer than 15 students. Teachers at this school were obliged to follow specific syllabi and textbooks; they were free to bring in supplementary teaching materials. Teachers whose practices are discussed are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants in the Study, Including Their Participation in the Data Collection Strategies

Name	Sex	Years teaching	Highest degree	Undergraduate major	Survey	Interview	Classroom observations
Lisa	F	25	MA	TEFL	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mary	F	over 6	PhD	Linguistics	Yes	Yes	No

Note. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

The fieldwork of this study was limited to two participants who were working in the same private language institute in Hawaii. The language institute was connected to a private university in Hawaii. I had spent several months as a student at the university and obtained permission from the language institute to contact its teachers and invite them to take part in the study as volunteers. Two teachers at the institute consented to participate in the study.

Procedure

A mixed methods design was adopted for the current study. The survey was conducted by means of a questionnaire. A number of questionnaire items were adapted from Lightbown and Spada (2013), which thoroughly reflected common assumptions concerning L2 learning (pp. 3-4). In addition to the 18-item survey questionnaire, five close-ended questionnaire items were added to further investigate teacher beliefs especially about grammar teaching (see Appendix A). The survey was administered in March and April 2017 to Lisa and Mary respectively. As is typical with Likert scales, each predetermined response option was converted into numbers (*strongly agree* = 4, *agree* = 3,

disagree = 2, *strongly disagree* = 1). The sum of each item was calculated in order to rank the items according to the degree of agreement.

A 1-hour interview with the teachers was conducted the same day and took place shortly after the survey had been completed. The interviews contained a list of 15 prepared questions to ascertain teacher beliefs about grammar teaching. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full. The written transcriptions were returned to each teacher to check accuracy. The teachers then returned written comments with the transcripts.

In addition to the interviews, classroom observation was adopted as another qualitative research method. The five lessons of Lisa's grammar class were held one hour per day over a period of one week beginning March 13, 2017. Through classroom observations, qualitative observation notes were taken and copies of all instructional materials including textbooks and handouts were obtained. The transcriptions of the interviews and qualitative observation notes were analyzed using Dörnyei's (2007) framework. They were perused and categorized according to broader topics or concepts.

Results
Survey Results
The teachers supported Items 8, 11, 12, 15, 17, 20, 21, and 23 (see Appendix A). The results of the survey showed that the teachers had positive beliefs about formal grammar instruction. That is, the teachers placed a high value on explicit grammar teaching (Item 23, M = 4). They had positive views on the effect of explicit teaching, believing that "students learn what they are taught" (Item 15, M = 3.5). They seemed to believe that learners might acquire grammatical features of a second language in order of complexity (Item 11, M = 3.5). They placed emphasis on the need for noncommunicative activities, such as repetition and practice (Item 20, M = 3.5). The teachers believed that mistakes should be corrected immediately because they could easily turn into habits that might be difficult to unlearn (Item 12, M = 3.5). It is clear that the teachers saw the value in the ability to produce particular phonetic sounds at the segmental level (Item 8, M = 3.5).

On the other hand, the participants disagreed most with Items 2, 14, 18, 19, and 22 (see Appendix A). The results of the survey showed that the teachers believed in the value of communication. The teachers disagreed with the idea that "learning a second language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules" (Item 19, M = 2). It is clear that the teachers believed that students' group or pair activities could be included in their classrooms. The teachers reported that students were able to communicate with each other without memorizing grammar rules (Item 22, M = 1.5), and they were able to learn how to use the target language in the classroom (Item 18, M = 1.5). They did not agree that "when learners are allowed to interact freely, they copy each other's mistakes" (Item 14, M = 1.5). In other words, the teachers were convinced of the importance of language use in L2 learning. As a result, they felt that they should incorporate communicative activities into their classrooms and have students use the target language.

Interview Results
Analysis of the interview data revealed five main beliefs that influenced the teachers' grammar teaching.

Belief A: Teaching Grammar Is Critical
Both of the teachers held the belief that grammar was the most fundamental part of language learning. Lisa emphasized that grammar was the foundation of speaking and writing. In addition, the teachers believed that grammar teaching was more essential to students who were learning a language for academic purposes. Mary said that if the class did not have an academic purpose and the goal was to get students to speak comfortably in English on different topics, grammar would not matter. However, the main goal of the institute she worked at was "to make sure the students can succeed at a university in an English speaking country." In order to meet the goal, the teachers should teach grammar, and the students should be able to use "the correct type of language." Otherwise, "the instructors throw them [students' essays] in the trash because [those essays have] too many mistakes."

Belief B: Explicit Grammar Teaching Is Fundamental
The teachers stressed the importance of clear and direct grammar teaching. Mary emphasized the value of "clear explanations" in order to "guide the students in the right directions." In addition, there seemed to be an assumption that explicit grammar teaching would address cognitive needs of adult learners and facilitate their language learning. Lisa said, "With children, I wouldn't even bother to explain anything. This [language learning] is mostly imitation." However, as for adult learners, Lisa said, "You can give the grammar foundation first because adult learners can logically arrange the information."

Belief C: Grammar Practice Is Important

Both of the teachers stated that explicit grammar teaching should be followed by grammar practice. Lisa said, "I always know that the theory is important, but it [grammar] has to be reinforced by practice and usage." Mary also said, "Learning the rules is like the first step and then we need practice." The teachers seemed to believe that grammar practice would consolidate students' understanding of the grammar items previously taught and eventually enable the students to make them "productive skills" and use them in speaking and writing. Mary said, "We taught this 2 months ago, by now [the grammar item] should be in your productive skills, but not because you memorize all the rules, because you did so much practice."

Belief D: The Methods Worked for the Teachers and Their Students as Well

The participants' learning and teaching experiences were major factors in the development of their beliefs about grammar teaching. Both of the teachers learned English as a foreign language. The teachers' pedagogical beliefs about grammar teaching initially came from their perceptions of what worked well in their own learning experiences. Lisa said, "I am a person whose English is the second language, so I learned grammar by myself. I figured out how to pass it on to students." Lisa relied on her learning experiences to figure out how to teach grammar. Mary had learned many foreign languages besides English. According to Mary, she learned these languages in the same way. That is, she first learned grammar in a classroom setting and then visited places where people spoke those languages as their first language. Mary said that she was able to be a fluent speaker of multiple languages. She taught grammar first and had her students practice it because she felt this learning method was effective for her students as well. Mary commented, "It also seems to work really well for most of our students."

Belief E: Teacher Training Did Not Influence the Teachers

Both of the teachers completed teacher-training programs at the college level; however, the programs barely influenced their beliefs about grammar teaching. According to Mary, explicit grammar teaching was not seen as an efficient teaching method at her college program. She commented, "When I was studying, there were a lot of, a lot of people [who] believed that basically it is evil to teach grammar. So you should not discuss grammar in your classes ever." However, Mary's beliefs had been firmly established through her successful learning experiences. Mary said, "I very strongly believe that it

[explicit grammar teaching] works for adult learners if you do it right in the combination with practice. It works for me." As for Lisa, she said that her teacher-training program at college had not included how to teach grammar. As a result, neither of the teachers' apprenticeships had affected their practices of grammar teaching.

Classroom Observation Results

The researcher observed five lessons of Lisa's grammar class. Analysis of the classroom observation data (see Appendix B) revealed three key features of her classes. First, the classes observed were heavily teacher-fronted. The teacher gave a lecture in front of the classroom. She led a discussion by asking questions of the students. When a student gave a correct answer to her question, the teacher stated "correct" or "exactly." Students' errors were corrected as soon as they were made. The teacher was the center of attention, and her feedback was confined to whether the answer was correct or not.

Second, there were limited interactions in the classroom. There were few interactions between the teacher and the students. Also, there were few observed student-student interactions. The teacher relied on rote grammar exercises in the textbook. As a result, even if students were given a chance to use the target language, it happened usually in the form of a short response to the teacher's question. The students repeated structural patterns with little or no control over their own output. The teacher occasionally incorporated what she considered communicative activities, such as what she called dialogues, presentations, or email correspondence. However, they were done basically based on rote memorization.

Third, grammar points were explained deductively. The teacher introduced a new grammar point using linguistic terms. For example, she said, "What kind of modal verbs do we have?" or "Where do you use it [passive voice]?" Next, she explained the rule explicitly, gave examples, and had students practice it using drills in the textbook. The textbook was the main source of information for her grammar instruction. As a result, information shared with the students appeared to be irrelevant to them. Although the teacher often brought handouts as extra teaching materials, they were used to practice grammatical patterns as well.

Conclusion
Discussion

The first research question was "What are the instructional practices in regards to grammar teaching?" The results of the classroom observations revealed two defining

characteristics in regards to the teacher's approach to grammar teaching. First, the teacher implemented the more traditional focus on forms that entails students' primary focus to be on the forms (Ellis, 2006). In other words, in the classroom, linguistic forms were extracted from communicative activities, and therefore they were taught out of context (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Grammar items were introduced one by one in a linear fashion. The teacher explained a grammar item explicitly, gave examples, and had students practice it. The students were given few opportunities to explore "meaning (semantics) in context appropriate use (pragmatics)" (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 252). That is, grammar was "taught and learned independent of meaning, social function, and discourse structure" (Celce-Murcia, 1991, pp. 476-477). Second, there was a strong orientation towards drills. The main activities of the class were doing drills in the textbook and checking answers. Each teacher prompt had only one correct response, and students completed the exercise without focusing on meaning. In other words, there were limited opportunities for genuine communication, which involves "the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning" (Savignon, 1997, p. 225).

The second research question was "What are the teachers' beliefs underpinning their instructional practices in regards to grammar teaching?" According to the survey (see Appendix 1) and interview results (Beliefs A and B), it was clear that the participants believed in the value of explicit teaching and learning of grammar. Furthermore, the interview results uncovered the reasons for this belief. First, the teachers believed that there are two types of language. On the one hand there is informal spoken language and on the other hand, formal written language. Formal or academic language was seen as "the correct type of language" (Mary) that required explicit grammar instruction. Second, the teachers considered adult learners to be different from younger learners. They believed that adult learners could logically arrange grammar information they were given. As a result, explicit grammar teaching was considered more useful when they were teaching adult learners.

Although the participants believed in the value of explicit teaching and learning of grammar, they also cared about spontaneous communication as revealed by the survey results (see Appendix A). This provides evidence of potentially conflicting beliefs in teachers' belief systems (Borg, 1998; Burns, 1992; Nishino, 2012). However, the teachers did not view these two beliefs as contradictory. Even though the students began by receiving instruction of new grammar items in a passive way, the teachers believed that later they would be able to use the knowledge productively through grammar practice. This seems to point to a coexistence of positive beliefs about noncommunicative activities and CLT-oriented beliefs in the teachers' belief systems (Nishino, 2012).

The final research question was "How did the teachers learn about grammar teaching?" The interview results helped to answer this question. The teachers believed that the methods that worked for them were also effective for their students (Belief D). In addition, they felt the teacher training they received did not influence their teaching practices (Belief E). Instead, the participants' personal experiences played a major role in the development of their beliefs in regards to grammar teaching. The teachers' personal success as language learners had strongly influenced their instructional decisions in grammar teaching. This makes sense in light of the studies that have found that teachers' pedagogical beliefs were shaped by their learning experiences (Borg, 1998; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999). Also, the teachers in this study continued to develop their beliefs through their teaching experiences. Their beliefs about grammar teaching were reinforced by their perceptions that their teaching worked well with their students. This is in line with the past research findings that have noted the influence of teaching experiences on teacher beliefs (Borg, 1998; Nishino, 2012; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999).

Future Issues

Through the use of multiple data sources, including surveys, interviews, and classroom observations, the aim of this study was to explore the participants' beliefs and practices of grammar teaching. However, there were limitations in the research methods of this study: It was limited to two participants who were working in the same private language institute in Hawaii. Due to the small participant size, the results of this study cannot be generalized to other teaching contexts. The teachers' beliefs in this study cannot be considered representative of the general ELT community. Nevertheless, this small study suggested that there is a considerable impact of teacher beliefs on grammar teaching. Pajares (1992) said, "Individuals' beliefs strongly affect their behavior" (p. 326). In this light, the implications from this study show that in order to make changes in teachers' practices, educators need to give more attention to their beliefs.

Acknowledgments

Bio Data

Kyonmi You received her MA in TESOL from Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. She teaches at Nagasaki University in the Center for Language Studies. <you-kiss@ nagasaki-u.ac.jp>

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Appendix A
Classroom Observation Data

Item No.	Statement	Lisa	Mary	Mean
1	Languages are learned mainly through imitation.	3	3	3
2	Parents usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors.	3	1	2
3	Highly intelligent people are good language learners.	3	2	2.5
4	The most important predictor of success in second language acquisition is motivation.	4	2	3
5	The earlier a second language is introduced in school programmes, the greater the likelihood of success in learning.	3	3	3

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Item No.	Statement	Lisa	Mary	Mean
6	Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language.	3	3	3
7	The best way to learn new vocabulary is through reading.	3	3	3
8	It is essential for learners to be able to pronounce all the individual sounds in the second language.	4	3	3.5
9	Once learners know 1,000 words and the basic structure of a language, they can easily participate in conversations with native speakers.	3	3	3
10	Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time, and learners should practise examples of each one before going on to another.	4	2	3
11	Teachers should teach simple language structures before complex ones.	4	3	3.5
12	Learners' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits.	4	3	3.5
13	Teachers should use materials that expose students only to language structures they have already been taught.	4	2	3
14	When learners are allowed to interact freely (for example, in group or pair activities), they copy each other's mistakes.	1	2	1.5
15	Students learn what they are taught.	4	3	3.5
16	Teachers should respond to students' errors by correctly rephrasing what they have said rather than by explicitly pointing out the error.	4	2	3
17	Students can learn both language and academic content (for example, science and history) simultaneously in classes where the subject matter is taught in their second language.	3	4	3.5

Item No.	Statement	Lisa	Mary	Mean
18	Classrooms are good places to learn about language but not for learning how to use language.	1	2	1.5
19	Learning a second language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.	2	2	2
20	It is essential for learners to repeat and practice a lot.	4	3	3.5
21	Students should answer a question with complete sentences.	4	3	3.5
22	Learners need to memorize grammar rules before they are ready for communication.	1	2	1.5
23	Teachers should give students explicit explanations about grammar rules so that students can understand rules.	4	4	4

Note. strongly agree = 4, agree somewhat = 3, disagree somewhat = 2, strongly disagree = 1

Appendix B
Classroom Observation Data (Example)

Lisa's grammar class on March 14, 2017

A group of advanced adult ESL students from Japan, China, and Thailand (15 students: six male students and nine female students)

Time (Minutes)	Activity
0—15	After taking attendance, the teacher reviews grammar points of the previous lesson. She writes "the package (deliver) by the mail company" on the board and has the students change the sentence by forming passive voice with different tenses. The teacher writes tenses on the board: simple present, present progressive, present perfect, simple past, past progressive, past perfect, simple future, be going to, and future progressive. The teacher gives approximately 10 minutes so that the students can answer the questions. The students work alone. After that, the teacher has students check their answers using the textbook and mark mistakes. She moves around to check the students' progress. Some students do not notice errors in their sentences. The teacher says to them, "No mistake?"
15—25	The teacher checks homework, which is related to passive voice with the class. She chooses one student by calling his/her name and has the student read his/her answer. If the student gives an expected answer, the teacher says to the student "correct" or "exactly." If the student gives an unexpected answer, the teacher calls another student's name and has the student read his/her answer. After that, she explains grammar points related to the sentence. The teacher repeats the same procedure until the exercises in the textbook are finished. Occasionally, the teacher checks the spelling of words. For example, she asks students, "What is the spelling of 'taught'?" or "What is the spelling of 'caught'?"

Time (Minutes)	Activity
25—45	The teacher has students do exercises in the textbook. She has the students check whether a verb in each sentence is transitive or intransitive. After that, she has the students complete the sentence by forming passive voice of the verbs listed. The teacher gives approximately 10 minutes so that the students can answer the questions. The students are instructed to work alone or in pairs. The teacher checks the answers with the class. She chooses a student by calling his/her name, and has the student read his/her answer. If the student gives an expected answer, the teacher says to the student, "Correct" or "Exactly." If the student gives an unexpected answer, the teacher calls another student's name and has the student read his/her answer. After that, she explains grammar points related to the sentence. The teacher repeats the same procedure until the exercises in the textbook are finished.
45—50	The teacher tells the students to do exercises in the textbook for homework. The class is over.