

EXAMINING INSTITUTIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAM: ENGLISH TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES

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Abstract

The issue of what the role of grammar is and how it should be taught is still considered a dilemma among English teachers. Though various schools of thought and methodologies were discovered, the convincing postulations and effective practices in language learning are still in constant exploration. As an attempt to alleviate this dilemma, this research aims to identify teacher beliefs and practices when it comes to grammar. Utilizing a single case study method, perspectives and methodologies were studied from an English teacher in the Philippines. Findings revealed that grammar was still an important aspect in the language learning and teaching. However, fluency was greatly emphasized over accuracy. In practice, Communicative Language Teaching was the most commonly observed method utilized in teaching grammar. It is suggested that there should be a balance between form and function aspects of teaching grammar.

Keywords: teaching grammar, language teaching practices, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

In the Philippine context, English is one of the official languages. Compared to most Asian countries, English is considered as a second language in the Philippines because of the considerable amount of exposure of Filipinos towards the language. In fact, Philippines outranked India in the business process outsourcing market segment due to English quality and accent neutrality (The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India, 2014). Despite this recognition, English proficiency among Filipinos has now been declining based on the report of Wilson (2009). Erroneous textbooks and poor quality of teaching are viewed as factors which contribute to this problem.

Efforts have consistently been made by the government to provide solutions to the issue. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) of the Philippines once issued Memorandum Order No. 59 of 1996 which mandates Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to conduct remedial

classes for incoming freshmen who need improvement to the required competence of language skills both in oral and written forms before taking English subjects in college. This process calls for a preparation for students to strengthen their adaptive mechanisms to the academic culture in the college setting.

In response, the Colegio de Davao (pseudonym), the locale of this research, added an English subject which had a description of English Proficiency Program (EPP). It was a 3-unit course taken by first year students in the first semester to develop their competence in English grammar, emphasizing the different parts of speech.

However, Colegio de Davao faced a lot of challenges from the earliest years of the subject's implementation up to the present time. It is a general observation among English teachers that the majority of the students are still struggling in expressing themselves in the English language, particularly in speaking and writing skills. With the students' advancement to higher English subjects, common errors in parts of speech and subject-verb agreement are manifested from their outputs. Institution's open admission process, teaching attrition rate, and heavy teaching load can be perceived as causes to the problem.

Through this point of view, it was hypothesized that English teacher's perspectives and practices in teaching grammar could be contributing factors to the frozen development of students' English proficiency. Therefore the main purpose of this study was to describe English teachers' perspectives and practices in teaching grammar. Particularly, it answered the following objectives: to identify English teachers' perspectives in teaching grammar and to determine the practices employed by the English teacher in teaching grammar in relation to the identified perspective.

Furthermore, this research holds significance, particularly, in providing awareness to the English teachers the importance of perspectives in teaching grammar. In this manner, the knowledge they can get from this study can help them decide some objectives that would align to their teaching practices. Furthermore, the results of this research can be the basis for the improvisation of the existing program being studied.

Teacher's beliefs on grammar

The issue of how grammar should be taught has undergone a lot of modifications in the recent years. Constant exploration is still made by different researchers since this field is relatively well-explored one. Most research highlights the role of teachers' perspectives because of its importance in grammar instruction. It is deemed that the belief of a teacher significantly influences his or her classroom practices (Larenas, Hernandez, & Naverrete, 2015; Hos & Kekec, 2014; Hartwick, 2004).

Teachers' beliefs in teaching and learning English were figured in the study of Larenas, Hernandez, and Naverrete (2015). The participants of the study stated that the use of English language in the classroom must be emphasized through communicative approaches wherein the teacher should model the use of the language. This reflects functionalists' perspectives since teachers perceived grammar based on its practical use. However, to systematically achieve the balance between form and function, focusing on grammar functions should be done effectively without compromising the development of learner's competence when it comes to accuracy in particular. This is also crucial when it comes to learners' writing skills.

Identifying the variety of beliefs in grammar teaching was determined by Hos and Kekec (2014) in Turkey. Among sixty (60) EFL teachers, findings revealed that grammar was crucial for the teachers in language learning. They considered it as a tool, but they emphasized that it was not a must. Clearly, the form or structure barely plays an essential aspect for the teachers. A good

point to consider in this study is that, the view of grammar as a necessity is not tolerated. The only pitfall for this study is the lack of address on how grammar should take place if it is not viewed to be a prerequisite. It is recommended to introspectively explore the consequences of compromising grammar in language learning.

In a similar way, the research of Hartwick (2004) delved into teachers' perspectives in terms of comparison between oral and written grammar. The results revealed that students must possess readiness when it dealt with new grammar structures since this was considered to be a necessity for accuracy. Fluency over accuracy was their main perspective in order to convey messages. Both teachers believed that grammar should not be taught explicitly. Hence, a constructivist way was an ideal way of letting the students discover the rules through examples given by a teacher. It was believed that learning grammar was best if it was taught inductively.

Teaching practices on grammar

In addition to teacher's beliefs, practices play a vital role in a language classroom. It does not only manifest teachers' perspectives, but a systematic design of learning management would also lead to effective learning. The field of practices is also a well-developed arena and a relatively explored one in research (Larenas, Hernandez, & Naverrete, 2015; Hos & Kekec, 2014; Hartwick, 2004).

Teachers' practices in teaching and learning English were examined in the study of Larenas, Hernandez, and Naverrete (2015). The participants mentioned that students were considered valuable in student-centered grammar teaching in which teachers could employ a variety of materials and activities. Affective factors must not be neglected, and creating a positive atmosphere that fosters love and care was highly encouraged. The language curriculum should lead in enhancing the four macro skills of the students as this would be the basis for the contents in the course book. The good thing about this study is that it centers with affective domains and how they affect language learning based on the point of views of the participants.

Likewise, Hos and Kekec (2014), investigating 60 EFL teachers in grammar teaching, found out that the majority of the participants used Communicative Language Teaching while few employed Grammar Translation Method and Eclectic Approach. The teachers believed that students should use their first language in the classroom. In this way, comprehension was maximized or being reinforced through the use of native language or mother tongue. Both inductive and deductive must be used hand in hand in classroom practices. In this study, grammar drills and exercises were less emphasized. This study holds a balanced approach among teachers.

Oral and written grammar practices were also investigated by Hartwick (2004). Findings revealed that integrating speaking and listening was manifested in the participants' classroom practices. They tend to focus on how the grammar is applied into a variety of functions. Activities comprised of comparing and contrasting, analysis towards structure, listening to word stress and intonation, modelling, and peer-editing. Performance based activities which bear subjectivity were highlights in this study.

The aforementioned studies above are valuable to support the findings of this research. The studies revealed diverse perspectives to the role of grammar in language learning and teaching. Moreover, several studies, particularly in teaching grammar, still hold nuances in terms of activities and what macro skill is emphasized in language. The studies indicate purposive in nature as a supplement to the findings of the research.

METHOD

Research design

The research design used in this study was the qualitative research design wherein the researcher employed a single case study method to explore the English teacher's perspectives and methodology in teaching English grammar. The method suited for this study since it explored and reflected in-depth investigation of the individual's point of view, in this case, asking the participant with his or her broad and general knowledge, and collecting detailed and rich views in the form of words (Creswell & Clark, 2003).

Participant

The only participant of the study was a male English teacher of Colegio de Davao, a private, non-sectarian academic institution, located in Mindanao, the Philippines, and also the locale of the study. He was a full-time faculty member under the College of Teacher Education who was handling English subjects both in General Education and major subjects to various degree programs. He was also a PhD candidate, specializing in Applied Linguistics and had more than five (5) years of teaching experience. The researcher employed a purposive sampling technique wherein the participant was chosen in terms of his educational attainment and years of teaching experience. Cole (2014) defined purposive sampling as a type of sampling based on participants' characteristics and objectives of the study. This sampling was applicable since this research aimed to generate knowledge from a given expertise. I acknowledged more qualified participants; however, they refused to be interviewed and observed on their respective classes.

Data collection

The researcher sent a letter of permission to the Program Head of the College of Teacher Education, seeking for approval to undergo a case study within the college. In-depth interview approach was used in the study to document the participant's responses. Upon the approval, the researcher asked the permission of the participant to record his responses and provided disclaimer that the information covered in the interview would be taken with utmost confidentiality. The participant was interviewed orally and individually. The questions were given in advance so that the participant can prepare for his accurate answers. The responses were recorded from an audio device and transcribed afterwards. The participant's answers were classified in accordance to the two categories namely the role of grammar and the teacher's practices on grammar instruction.

Data analysis

Semantic content analysis was utilized to analyze the participant's responses in the interview. Through the analysis, some major categories were identified and described. According to Dean-Brown and Rodgers (2002), researcher's inferences are valid through the meaningful concepts observed from the data. Hence, the data were analyzed based on the perspectives expressed by the participant and aligned on the following categories: the role of grammar and the teacher's practices on grammar. The steps in data analysis were adapted from Brown and Rogers cited in Larenas, Hernandez, and Navarrete (2015) which include data segmentation, initial coding, and categorization.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Teacher's perspectives on the role of grammar

The analysis on teacher's perspectives made it clear that grammar was an important aspect of

language learning and teaching. The teacher mentioned that *“grammar is actually one of the focal points in language learning and teaching”*. The teacher believed that grammar was needed for a successful communication process because this eliminated *“misunderstandings, conflict, and dysfunctional communication”*. In this point of view, it shows that the teacher focused more on how grammar could be applied to different communication instances. Comprehensively, the teacher's perspective bears similarity among functionalists when it comes to language learning which is parallel to the study of Hartwick (2004) where the teachers focus on different grammar applications into a variety of functions.

In addition, formal context, according to the participant, was *“one of the best avenues or places”* where grammar could be learned. It can be pointed out that the teacher prioritized highly structured program for its manageable characteristic. However, the teacher still considered informal learning as a supplementary exposure for language learning. This finding conforms to the study of Kekec and Kim (2014) where they acknowledge second language classrooms as to how grammar can successfully be taught.

In terms of fluency and accuracy, the teacher agreed that mastering grammar could develop fluency *“through spontaneous and quick language transfer”* and accuracy by *“proper construction of thoughts”*. In my analysis, the teacher put emphasis on fluency over accuracy. Though this aspect was recognized, teacher's belief on accuracy shed light on communicative practice which centered fluency over accuracy. This was revealed in his statement that *“incorrect and improper usage of words lead to defective communication”*. This finding asserts the study of Larenas, Hernandez, and Navarrete (2015) where the majority of the teachers perceived communicative approaches to be highlighted in the language classrooms.

Teacher's practices on grammar instruction

Based on the interview, the teacher stated that he utilized Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). He added that he chose CLT because *“it suits the needs of the students or learners”*. I assume that the teacher had already conducted needs analysis towards his classes. It is noteworthy to mention that this practice is actually aligned to his perspective that there should be emphasis on fluency rather than accuracy. This result is connected to the study of Hos and Kekec (2014) wherein majority of the participants employed CLT in teaching grammar.

In terms of the class activities, the common ground observed was that they were more performance-based and dealt with the feature of subjectivity rather than objectivity. The teacher conducted *“an essay writing, impromptu speaking, or a simple reporting to assess students' learning and performance inside the classroom”*. The activities mentioned are assessed based on a rubric. This finding is similar to Hartwick's (2004) where integrating speaking activities is manifested in teachers' practices.

Another finding revealed that one material utilized by the teacher was English Proficiency Program Module wherein students or learners were engaged in drilling and exercises. This reflects to the traditional form of grammar assessment. On the other hand, the teacher also showed *“movies or video clips taken from Youtube or any other kind of media.”* This was contrary to the first material mentioned. The incorporation of multiliteracy was the evidence of the difference. Balanced approach to focus on form and focus on function of instructional materials was highly shown. The finding is in line with the study of Larenas, Hernandez, and Navarrete (2015) where participants employ a variety of materials and activities in a student-centered approach.

In summary, major perspectives are aligned to their respective practices. However, inconsistencies were obviously observed through the teacher's responses and the field notes. It was evident

during the classroom observation that the teacher utilized explicit and direct approach and just simply let the students answer their textbooks after the lecture. The data gathered mirrors the classical way of teaching grammar. I therefore posit that the interview and the observation merely revealed the contrast resulting in a mismatch of findings. This aligns to the study of Hos and Kekec (2014) where differences were observed among participants' beliefs and practices.

CONCLUSION

The following conclusions and recommendations are herewith given based on the generated from the findings. First, grammar is still an important aspect in language learning and teaching, therefore, teachers should still incorporate grammar in any English subjects. Second, fluency is still greatly emphasized over accuracy; hence, teachers must perceive that accuracy should not be neglected especially in developing writing skills. Lastly, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is utilized in teaching grammar, so, CLT with a balanced approach should be employed by the teachers.

Furthermore, I acknowledge the limitations of this research. As a recommendation for future researchers, they may increase the number of participants, conduct more classroom observations, add more data sources, and explore a comparative study among the different participants.

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