

Teaching English Grammar: In-Service English Language Teachers' Perceptions

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the perceptions of in-service English teachers towards teaching grammar in secondary level. I employed a qualitative research design. The study was carried out within the theoretical framework of social constructivism and cognitivism. Three in-service English teachers of secondary level, teaching at three different community schools in Rupandehi district, Nepal were purposively selected as research participants. They were interviewed using a semi-structured interview technique to collect relevant information for the purpose. The study reveals that in-service English teachers have positive attitudes towards teaching grammar. Furthermore, they opined that grammar plays a central role in teaching English language, and should not be taught deductively. In addition, they were in favour of the use of inductive method of teaching grammar as this method enhances the students to produce syntactically and semantically correct sentences with appropriate and relevant vocabulary. The study further demonstrates that deductive method is also in practice to teach grammar because the students feel better and more comfortable to receive rules and structures of grammar from the teachers. This study contributes to English teachers' comprehensive understanding of teaching grammar in their classrooms.

Keywords: Deductive Method, Inductive Method, Teaching English Grammar

Introduction

English grammar is one of the major aspects of teaching English language. It is a set of rules that are used to describe and shape language phonologically, morphologically, syntactically and semantically. Giri (2007) stated that grammar refers to the way in which morphemes are put together into words, words into phrases, phrases into clauses and clauses into sentences. In Thornbury's (1999) words, grammar is an instrument to form meaningful sentences of English language. Grammar is one of the aspects of language that should be learnt and taught. It is the backbone of any language. It is the study of what forms (or structures) are possible in a language. Nassaji and Fotos (2011, p. 12) stated, "Grammar is fundamental to language, without grammar language does not exist". In foreign language acquisition accurate understanding of the language structures is the key part, so teaching grammar is an essential aspect of foreign language instruction.

Grammar plays a vital role at every step of language teaching. "Without the knowledge of grammar, learners' language development will be severely constrained" (Widodo, 2006, p.122). In this regard, Zhang (2009, p. 1) argued, "English language learners who have been lacking in grammar rules

instruction can neither use English language accurately to make a complete sentence, nor speak English language fluently on accuracy”. Hence, grammar teaching is considered as an integral part of language teaching. It is fundamental to language and an indispensable component of any language teaching programme.

Therefore, teaching of grammar is essential if students are to develop the confidence in their ability to use language in various social and educational settings. Grammar is seen as “an essential, inescapable component of language use and language learning” (Burgess & Etherington, 2002, as cited in Dikici, 2012). So, for the existence and perfection of language in meaningful way it needs to teach grammar. Formal grammar teaching helps learners to acquire second language (L2) more rapidly and get higher level of achievement. Ur (1999, p. 4) stated, “There is no doubt that a knowledge-implicit or explicit- of grammatical rules is essential for the mastery of a language: you cannot use words unless you know how they should be put together”. Therefore, teaching of grammar is necessary to organize words into sentences to convey the intended meaning.

In fact, in teaching of language, learners are expected to be competent in grammar as knowing more about grammar will enable them to build better sentences in speaking and writing performances. On the other hand, grammatical rules enabled learners to know and applied how sentence patterns should be put together. For most teachers, the main idea of grammar teaching is to help learners internalise the structures taught in such a way that they can be used in everyday communication (Ellis, 2002). The importance of teaching grammar cannot be underrated as Long and Richards (1987) added “it cannot be ignored that grammar plays a central role in the four language skills and vocabulary to establish communicative tasks” (as cited in Widodo, 2006, p.122). Improper use of grammar in language hinders communication to understand. Knowledge of grammar creates competence in the learners about how to develop words into sentences in meaningful sense. In this context, Azar (2007) stated that grammar is the weaving that creates the fabric. So, to establish precise sentences, grammar knowledge is essential. In the same context, Ellis (2006) argued the following:

Grammar teaching involves any instructional technique that draws learners’ attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it meta-linguistically and / or process it in comprehension and / or production so that they can internalize it (p. 84).

Grammar knowledge in language acquisition is quite essential to avoid confusion in language understanding. Richards and Renandya (2002) mentioned that grammar helped learners to use language correctly. The knowledge of building certain grammatical structures helps learners communicate language

meaningfully. So, grammar is too important, and without a good knowledge of grammar, learners' language development will be severely constrained.

However, teaching grammar has been a controversial issue in language teaching and learning. Some scholars and linguists have argued in favor of teaching grammar with the logic that it provides clear guidelines for language usage. On the other hand, some have opined against teaching grammar and stated that it is less useful to develop communicative competence. Therefore, it has some unsettled controversies for a long time. In Thornbury's (1999, p. ix) words "Grammar teaching has always been one of the most controversial and least understood aspects of language teaching". In the similar vein, Lakhoua (2016) stated with the advent of the communicative approach in English language teaching, grammar has been marginalized as the focus has shifted from accuracy to fluency and communicative competence. From grammar translation to the communicative approach, linguists and scholars have put forward different views regarding whether to teach or not to teach grammar and in what way to teach.

The attitudes for and against teaching grammar have been influenced by the changes in language teaching methods and approaches in ELT. For grammar proponents, it may be inconceivable to teach a foreign language without teaching its grammar, whereas for grammar opponents, one can learn a foreign language without learning its grammar. The latter view grammar could be developed through use and communication skill, not through its rules.

There has always been a debate about the most effective way of teaching grammar. Some linguists like Krashen (1982) argued that formal instruction in grammar will not contribute to the development of 'acquired' knowledge. Others, however, have argued that grammar teaching does help in learning and acquiring language (Ellis, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2003; Ur, 1999; Thornbury, 1999; Doff, 2000; Cowan, 2009). Likewise, Doff (2000) mentioned that by learning grammar students can express meanings in the form of phrases, clauses and sentences. Similarly, some are in favour of teaching grammar explicitly, whereas others argue that implicit instructions are more effective to develop communicative competence in the learners. In the same line, Lardierno (1995) and Doughty (1991) argued "explicit instruction can increase learners' accuracy in the use of past tense forms and relative clauses" (as cited in Cowan, 2009, p.30).

In the context of Nepal, despite having debates on teaching grammar, English grammar has been taught from school level to Master level. This is perhaps for developing grammatical competence in the learners so that they can produce language correctly. With a good knowledge of grammar, the relationship between grammatical concepts gets clear. Grammar knowledge enables learners to be aware of parts of a

language such as verbs, and nouns. Learners will understand and use the grammatical concepts better if they study grammar. Being aware of this relationship facilitates understanding the language. Grammar knowledge will increase learners' comprehension of the language.

Regarding my own experience in English writing class of grade eleven, I observed that students who had good experience of grammar knowledge were taking an advantage over those students who had not. The students, with good instruction of grammar, were trying to say "I was really excited" not "I was really exciting." Those without that knowledge of grammar required a lot more teaching time in order to understand, just as one example, the difference between '-ing' and '-ed' adjectives. In this regard, Mart (2013) opined, "To be an effective language user, learners should study grammar because grammar skills will help learners to organize words and messages and make them meaningful" (p.124).

I adopted two major theories as a theoretical framework to explain the perceptions of in-service English language teachers on teaching grammar: Piaget's (1952) cognitive theory and social constructivism or social cultural theory developed by Vygotsky (1978). Cognitivism focuses on mental processes of people's perception, thought, beliefs, memory, etc. The cognitive theory states that people produce knowledge and form meaning based upon their experiences. As teaching is a cognitive activity (Farrell &Particia, 2005), this study is based on Piaget's (1952) cognitive theory. Similarly, as belief system is socially constructed through interactions with other individuals, this study is also based on social constructivism or socio-cultural theory developed by Vygotsky (1978). Constructivism "suggest that humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences"(Bada, 2015).Vygotsky considers cognitive development primarily as a function of external factors such as cultural, historical, and social interaction (Amineh&Asl, 2015).

In education programme teachers have their own certain perceptions, knowledge and beliefs, and prior experiences about teaching and learning grammar. Therefore, teachers' beliefs have an effective role in developing them as teachers (Dikici, 2012). In the teaching of grammar, English language teachers are expected to have their own beliefs and perspectives, which are reflected upon their prior experiences as students. In this regard, Piaget's cognitive theory and Vygotsky's social constructivism are apt as a theoretical basis for my study.

Similarly, this study is also supported Aristotle's inductive and deductive approaches of reasoning. Inductive reasoning moves from specific observations to broad generalizations, whilst deductive reasoning moves from general to specific procedures. Grammar teaching and learning encompasses these two approaches. In Thornbury's (1999, p.29) words, "*A deductive approach starts with the presentation of*

a rule and is followed by examples in which the rule is applied”, whereas “an inductive approach starts with some examples from which a rule is inferred.” Hence, a deductive approach focuses on rule-driven learning where learners are solely guided by the presented rules. Then, they apply the rules to specific language patterns, and consolidate through practices. On the other hand, in an inductive approach, learners are involved in observing patterns and structures of a language, rather than a rule, and they discover the rules by themselves before they practise the language. So, it is rule-discovery learning.

Several research studies have been carried out on teaching grammar, and teachers and students' perceptions towards grammar and grammar instruction. In this context, Deng and Lin (2016) did a study on comparative study on beliefs of grammar teaching between high school English teachers and students in China. The aim of the study was to compare and analyze the beliefs of high school students as well as teachers on grammar and grammar teaching behaviors. The result showed that teachers' grammar teaching had the tendency of communicative teaching while students' grammar beliefs had the characteristic of integration of communicative and traditional grammar teaching.

Uysal and Yavuz (2015) conducted a study about pre-service teachers' attitudes towards grammar teaching, in the context of Turkish Balykesir University. A questionnaire was used as research tool to elicit the data from the respondents. The findings in general showed that pre-service teachers showed an affirmative attitude towards grammar teaching although they strongly believe that it should not be taught directly or overtly. The study also showed that there is a gap between the practice and theory the reason of which may be the testing policy in Turkish educational system.

Likewise, Dikici (2012) explored pre-service English teachers' beliefs towards grammar and its teaching, studying at two Turkish Universities. The study aimed to investigate pre-service English teachers' pedagogical beliefs towards grammar and its teaching as well as their knowledge on the metalanguage of grammar. The data was collected using two questionnaires. The findings revealed that although a great majority of the participants favour the use of metalanguage in teaching grammar, and support the deductive grammar teaching practices, they themselves still have serious problems even with the most basic grammatical terminology.

Similarly, Aljohani (2012) carried out a quantitative cross-sectional research design with the aim of understanding the mental lives of non-native English language teachers at the tertiary level. The study also explored in-service teachers' beliefs on meaning of grammar, and grammar instructions. The research was done on two colleges at Yanbu Industrial City of Saudi Arabia. The research was a quantitative one with a cross-sectional design. The researcher used a self-completion questionnaire to collect data with a

Likert scale. Results showed that teachers had a good understanding of grammar and gave great importance to it. Further, teachers believed that form and meaning should be taught together; and it should be put in a meaningful context.

At present time, grammar teaching has become crucial. It has gained its place in the language curriculum. As an English teacher, I have been teaching English grammar from grade Eleven to Master level. So, my concern here is to explore how in-service English teachers of secondary level perceive grammar teaching in the context of Nepal though it is one of the most controversial issues in language teaching. Here, in my study, in-service teachers refer to those who have been involved in the real classroom teaching profession.

Even though grammar teaching is a controversial matter in English language teaching scenario, several researches have been carried out to understand the perceptions of teachers on teaching grammar.

Perception is a particular belief or a way of viewing something. In this study, perception means any sort of views and ideas that secondary level in-service English teachers hold regarding teaching English grammar. Investigating teachers' beliefs is crucial because every teacher has his /her certain beliefs. These beliefs should be specified as early as possible because they shape teachers' understanding of language teaching and learning as well as their practices (Johnson, 1992). Although the study of teachers' beliefs has emerged as a major area of enquiry in the field of language teaching, there is still little research that investigates in-service teachers' perceptions about teaching grammar. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the attitudes of in-service English teachers on teaching grammar and the ways they adopt to teach grammar. In order to achieve the objective of the study, I sought to answer the following questions from my participants.

- a. What is the attitude of the secondary level in-service English teachers toward teaching English grammar?
- b. What is the role of grammar in English language teaching?
- c. How do they think grammar should be taught and why?

Methodology

This study employs a phenomenological research approach, which "describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p.57). So, this study is qualitative in nature as it aims to explore the lived experiences of the participants. For the selection of research participants, first I piloted my interview questions on twelve secondary level in-service English teachers in Rupandehi district, Nepal, and purposively selected three of them for my research. They showed a considerable degree of understanding and practices in teaching grammar for

more than ten years, and agreed to share their views and lived experiences of teaching grammar. I selected them from three community schools (one teacher from each school) located in Rupandehi district of Province -5. Of three, two were males and one was female. Their age ranged from thirty-five to fifty years. They were all native speakers of Nepali language. Semi-structured interview with three participants was used as a research technique to elicit data for the study.

The participants were asked to express their opinions and lived experiences towards teaching grammar. The data was collected in different times from the participants through in-depth interviews. The data was recorded using audio recorder. The views were appreciated during the study to ensure confidentiality. The data was transcribed into English language from Nepali (i.e. participants' mother language), then the associated codes were assembled, and themes were created. After that, the themes were analyzed descriptively as the nature of the study was qualitative.

Findings and Discussion

On the basis of the information collected from the participants, I have drawn some findings or themes of the study. The results of the study are reported in three themes: In- service English language teachers' perceptions of teaching grammar, role of grammar in language, and method to be used for teaching grammar.

Teachers' perceptions of teaching grammar

Perceptions and beliefs have tremendous effects on the process of teaching and learning. "It is necessary to have better insights into teachers' beliefs because they have clearly been seen as one of the crucial factors that affect teachers and their teaching activities" (Thu, 2009). Regarding teaching grammar, all three participants showed positive attitudes. In response to the question 'How do you take English grammar teaching?' Participant 1 responded:

Grammar teaching is very crucial in English language teaching. It is not only important for the point of view of examinations, but also for the sake of producing correct sentences. Teaching grammar provides the students with knowledge of how language is constructed so that when they listen, speak, read and write, they have no trouble applying the language that they are learning.

This expression clearly indicates that in- service English teachers have positive beliefs on teaching grammar. They perceive it in a positive way. This expression is in line of Ur (1999), which believes that grammatical rules enable learners to know and apply how sentence patterns should be put together. Similarly, Participant 2 stated:

Grammar and its rules are inevitable in our context in order to develop all aspects of language from accuracy to fluency. Without the rules of grammar, students cannot produce correct and

meaningful sentences. Besides, grammar helps students learn language in a short span of time. Students also feel comfortable and seem to be interested while I start to teach grammar topic.

This response clarifies that teaching grammar is unavoidable as the teachers have positive attitudes towards it for enhancing students' language accuracy and fluency. In addition, students are able to write sentences without any grammatical errors. Regarding the same question, Participant 3 opined:

I believe that grammar plays a prime role in the four language skills to establish communicative tasks. So, grammar teaching to the students cannot be ignored. Without having knowledge of grammar, students cannot put their ideas into intelligible sentences. Grammar provides a pathway to students how some lexical items should be combined into a good sentence so that meaningful and communicative statements or expressions can be formed.

This expression indicates that grammar teaching is vital in English language teaching. With the help of grammar, students can combine small elements to form a meaningful sentence.

Thus, all three participants gave much more focus on grammar teaching. They believed that grammar knowledge is crucial to develop communicative skills as well as form an accurate and meaningful discourse.

The role of grammar in language teaching

Teaching of grammar has been playing a prominent role in English language classroom. Without a good knowledge of grammar, learners' language development will be severely constrained. Practically, in the teaching of grammar, learners are taught rules of language commonly known as sentence patterns. Regarding the role of grammar, Ellis (2006) asserts that grammar holds a central position in language teaching. In the same line, Thornbury, (1999) wrote "there is no doubt that knowledge - implicit or explicit of grammatical rules is essential for the mastery of a language" (p.14). So, it is believed that a sound knowledge of grammar is crucial if pupils are going to use English creatively.

Regarding the role of grammar in English language teaching, all the three participants viewed that grammar plays a significant role in language teaching. Responding to the question "Why is grammar teaching important in English language classroom?", Participant 1 expressed:

Language learning is not possible without having a sound knowledge about grammar. Students cannot produce the acceptable language structures and convey the exact meanings unless they have knowledge about grammar. Grammar teaching is important for students to enhance their language skills.

The expression reveals that he focused on teaching grammar for developing language skills and confidence of the learners in using language for communication. Therefore, the knowledge of grammar is important.

Regarding the same question, Participant 2 opined the similar view stating that:

In language learning grammar is very-very essential, therefore it is included from primary level to the Masters level. We need to learn grammar to express anything in sense.

Participant 2 emphasized that teaching grammar is very important. Moreover, as he expressed grammar is included at all levels in our education system from primary level to even master level, it shows how far teaching grammar is important.

Similarly, in response to the similar question, Participant 3 stated:

Grammar is the backbone of language because...without grammar, we can't express language accurately. Grammar helps us encompass language structure or sentence patterns, meaning and use. It is important for us to improve listening, speaking, reading and writing as well.

This expression clearly indicates that teaching grammar is very helpful in developing the language skills such as reading, writing and speaking. Besides it, it helps learners express language without any hesitation.

From the above views given by three participants, it is evident that grammar plays a significant role in language teaching. In this regard, Widodo (2006) mentioned the grammar of a language is considered necessary to acquire the capability of producing grammatically acceptable utterances in the language.

Teaching grammar: Deductively or Inductively?

There are mainly two approaches to teaching grammar in English language: inductive and deductive. When grammar is taught deductively, a teacher emphasizes the presentations of the grammar rules and their examples in the beginning of the lesson. Students listen, note, read and memorize the rules and examples. In this regard, Nesic and Hamidovic (2015) claimed:

The deductive method is easier to apply than the inductive one, leaving little space for mistakes, provided it is explained in a correct and precise way. The deductive approach encourages students' confidence through numerous examples, at the same time stating clearly what students are expected to learn.

While teaching grammar inductively, students are expected to induce and formulate a rule by themselves (Thornbury, 1999). Namely, students produce rules indirectly, applying a rule to exercises from a text. The teacher's task is to provide the appropriate context where a certain rule is used, together with the appropriate context for communication.

Responding to the question 'How grammar is to be taught?' the participants opined that they were taught grammar through deductive method when they were at school, and still many teachers teach grammar deductively. In this regard, to quote Participant 1:

In the context of Nepal, teachers use deductive method of teaching grammar. They feel better and more comfortable to teach grammar through this method.

Participant 2 also viewed the same way. He stated:

All English teachers in our school, along with me, are using deductive approach to teaching grammar as the students prefer this method to inductive instruction. With the help of deductive instruction, they are correctly using the grammar rules to produce the sentences.

These two participants meant that they were taught English grammar in a deductive way while they were at school level, and they are following the same convention in their teaching as well. So, the views reveal that in the context of Nepal teachers mostly use deductive method of teaching grammar due to its tradition since long. Besides, students are habituated to learn grammar through deductive way.

Now, the participants have further more different opinions regarding how grammar should be taught. Though sometimes they use deductive way, all of them preferred inductive way of teaching grammar. Furthermore, Participant 1 presented his views again in these words:

Teachers should use the inductive approach to teaching grammar. It is the best method of teaching grammar. If the students are motivated and encouraged to learn grammar from the context and examples, they can easily produce the acceptable structures while expressing their views...learning becomes scientific and innovative, students become active and autonomous too. This method gives free and friendly environment to learn in the classroom. Inductive instruction helps students enhance their all language skills and aspects.

The expressions of the Participant 1 clarify that grammar should be taught indirectly and implicitly without presenting the rules and structures in the beginning. Grammar teaching should be communicative in nature involving students in interaction to induce the rules and structures by themselves. Regarding the same question, Participant 2 further stated:

Grammar should not be taught in isolation. If it is segregated from the context, students become failure to understand and interpret the meaning. Rules are less important in teaching grammar. Language should be learnt and that is only possible through interactions and practices. Rules should not be imposed neither should they be memorized. They are generalized and learnt instead.

The ideas expressed by the participant 2 show that grammar teaching should be practical through interaction and in context. Only the rules given to students do not help them use language as per situation.

In response to the same question, Participant 3 opined:

Grammar should be taught inductively giving examples and situations. Teaching grammar inductively enhances students' thinking and cognitive abilities. When grammar is taught separately from other language components, students are not able to apply such knowledge in everyday communication. The best way for mastering grammar is to participate in activities which refer to everyday situations. Students can improve the use of grammatical structures through constant practice.

From the response of Participant 3, it is evident that grammar should be taught with inductive instructions. If students are taught grammar inductively, they will be able to use language in their everyday communication. While using language constantly, students can improve the use of grammatical forms accurately.

The views and the lived experiences of the participants above suggest that grammar needs to be taught in interactive and contextual environment. This is in harmony with the assumption of constructivism because social constructivists argue that knowledge is constructed through interaction with others. The learners can construct meaning of grammar if interactive way of social and cultural contexts of learning grammar is set for them. The rules of grammar provided to the students make them failure to communicate in English in the real life situations. Therefore, interactive environment is crucial for learners to learn English grammar.

Conclusion

In-service English language teachers consider that grammar is quite essential for developing language skills. They have affirmative attitudes towards grammar and state that teaching of grammar facilitates learners to learn English language with a short span of time. The participants view that grammar teaching promotes accuracy and fluency at the same time. Knowledge of grammar provides a structured system for developing better linguistic competence that helps learners to formulate a sound performance in English language. They believe that if learners engage and interact with others, they discover grammar rules on their own. That is why, it is appropriate to teach grammar in inductive way so that they can use language in their everyday communication.

Though teachers are in favour of inductive method of teaching grammar, they are also using deductive method. It is not because of their will, but of the students' desire. Thus, it can be concluded that teaching grammar through inductive way is more practical, effective and scientific for enhancing students' language skills and aspects. Therefore, students need to be taught adopting inductive method of teaching grammar. They expect to be provided with opportunities for learning grammar through communicative activities. They can maintain both accuracy and fluency when the teaching and learning environment becomes student- centred and communicative. This study contributes to English language teachers' better understanding of teaching grammar.

In this study, I aimed to explore in-service teachers' perceptions towards teaching English grammar. How university level students and teachers, pre- service teachers perceive grammar teaching, the problems they

face, and the strategies to manage the problems of teaching English grammar can be some other areas for further research.

This study had some limitations that the further research studies may consider to address. First, this was a small scale study with only three participants and all of them belonged to the same level. Incorporating randomly selected large sample from different contexts may improve external validity of the findings. Second, this study used only interview as a research tool/ technique to explore the understanding of in-service English teachers towards teaching grammar. Incorporating different types of research techniques such as questionnaires and observation following quantitative or mixed research design would be worth considering.

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