



English Grammar Teaching and Classroom Practices: An Analysis of Reflective Practices of College Teachers in District Peshawar

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Keywords:

*Classroom practices,
Direct method,
Explicit teaching,
Grammar Teaching,
GTM,
Implicit teaching,
Perceptions.*

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the perceptions of college teachers about English grammar teaching and classroom practices in district Peshawar, Pakistan. The beliefs and insights of fifteen teachers from five different colleges of Peshawar were recorded through semi-structured interviews. To validate the participants' perception and their practices, observation sessions were also arranged. The analysis showed that majority of teachers either did not translate or failed to translate their perceptions into practice. The study concluded that participants' classroom practices are not always influenced or shaped by their perceptions and beliefs. There were other contextual issues or constraints directly related to teaching that compelled teachers to teach the way they teach. The analysis of interviews, collected through purposive sampling, showed that teachers who participated in the study suffered from a lack of correspondence between their teaching perceptions and practical teaching. The study concludes that understanding and mastery of grammar at the college level in Peshawar can be improved if teaching of English is made language-oriented as opposed to being purely treated as a separate subject. The study proposed that there is a need to design language-friendly English courses for the intermediate level students involving all the stakeholders including students, teachers and curriculum developers.

INTRODUCTION

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In 1970s when the communicative aspect of English language teaching was in focus, certain researchers thought that the teaching grammar as part of language learning was useless and ineffective (Terrel 1991; Weaver 1996); however, there were other researchers who believed that the role of grammar in teaching and learning of L2 was important (Richards, Gallo, and Renandya 2001). William and Burden (2002) are of the view that the teachers' perception, beliefs and attitudes conform to actual classroom practices. Since English grammar has a key role in learning L2 (Schulz, 2001), knowing what English language teachers think is very helpful in English language teaching. According to Hassan (2013), it is important to investigate the role of English language teachers by exploring their perceptions of their own teaching practices. Understanding their perceptions enable teachers to assess their teaching practices and to improve upon them (Schon, 1983) which in turn help evaluate teachers as reflective practitioners.

In Pakistan English is not only taught as a compulsory subject as part of school and college education but is also used as the medium of instruction. Despite this heavy emphasis on the teaching and learning of English in the first 12 years of education, majority of the students possess poor English language skills and find it difficult to communicate in the language. Since possible reasons for the students' failures could be many, this study explores the issue from the perspective of teachers in district Peshawar. The study aims at answering the following questions. What practices do teachers adopt and what do they think of them? How do they evaluate and interpret their own teaching practices? How effective they believe their practices and perceptions are? How informed their pedagogical practices are by their own reflections?

Aims and objectives:

- To interpret the practices adopted by the teachers and their thinking about the practices.
- To evaluate and interpret the teaching practices of their own.
- To know the effectiveness of their practices and perceptions.
- To know their information about their pedagogical practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Farrell and Lim (2005) compared teachers' perception and their actual classroom practices at school level. While majority of the teachers supported communicative method of grammar teaching, contradictions in the beliefs and classroom practices of the teachers were obvious. The contradictions were believed to be caused by factors such as time available for teaching, length of the syllabus and course contents, and the role of school administration and of parents. The study concluded that self-reflection on part of the teachers was important in improving language teaching and learning in the classroom. Sharabyan (2011) investigated the beliefs of 30 experienced (five to ten years of teaching experience) and very experienced (15 years) male teachers about 15 English grammar teaching techniques. While no quantitative difference was found between the experienced and very experienced teachers, qualitative analysis demonstrated that junior teachers were more motivated than the senior teachers. The young teachers were more open to changing their perceptions of teaching than the experienced ones. Kausar and Akhtar (2012) analyzed the understanding of teachers with respect to the effect of curriculum and evaluation on the student's competence to learn English language. The study highlighted the impact of excluding teachers—the major stakeholders—from the process of curriculum development. Since the curriculum did not take teachers' input into account, the curriculum and the examination system were found counterproductive in the process of language learning and teaching at college level. Similarly, since the examination system meant to test students' memory it was suggested that for the improvement of language teaching at intermediate level teachers' points-of-view needed to be considered in shaping the curriculum. Rehmani (2006) argued that public examination system in Pakistan is based on cramming and rote learning. There is no emphasis on conceptualization, creativity and critical thinking.

Hoang-Tu (2009) analyzed the views of male and female teachers in the United States. Hoang-Tu concluded that the majority of participants were in favor of correcting grammatical mistakes while teaching English. The study argued that the interference of L1 with L2 was due to the differences in the two languages. Moreover, the perspectives of teachers regarding their teaching practices were claimed to be of utmost importance in

language teaching.

Prosser and Trigwell (1997) explored the relationship between practice and perception of teachers in Australian universities. The research concluded that teaching context was a significant factor in constructing the teaching philosophies of teachers; therefore, for improving teaching in educational system the perception of teachers must be analyzed. They research proposed that the relation between perception and practice is determinative.

Ashraf and Rarieya (2008) explored the development of teachers through reflective dialogue in a Pakistani school. The study proposed that in order to improve teaching and learning practices the teachers need to engage in critical discussions. Reflective dialogue, says the study, is a useful way to improve teaching and learning practices in Pakistani setting. The study suggested that reflective conversations among teachers can strengthen teaching at the micro level.

Taking the above review into consideration, it may be argued that teachers being major stakeholders in any education system should be duly heard and their insights and perspectives prioritized to make language learning a meaningful activity. There is a need to explore and analyze teachers' perceptions and perspectives to identify factors responsible for pedagogical practices in district Peshawar. The present study investigates the perspectives of college teachers of district Peshawar in order to understand their teaching practices and what they think of teaching and learning in the classroom.

METHODOLOGY

The present study investigates teachers' perception in relation to their pedagogical practices. Fifteen English teachers with minimum of five years teaching experience at college level in Peshawar were interviewed. The participants were selected through purposive sampling from five different government and semi-government colleges. One-on-one semi structured interviews were employed to investigate the views and perspectives of the participants. The data was recorded, transcribed, organized into computer folders and later manually analyzed qualitatively for relevant themes. After analysis, the findings were validated through sharing the transcribed data with the

participants for confirmation of their responses and editing if demanded (Carter et.al. 2014).

The interviews were arranged at the time and place of the participants' convenience at their workplaces. The participants were interviewed in the language of their choice i.e. Pashto, Urdu, or English. The interview schedule contained a set of open-ended questions, and some follow up probes for participants to elaborate or clarify some points. It was ensured that all questions on the interview protocol were answered.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The participants of the study assigned a central role to grammar teaching in students' language learning during the first two years in the college. They believed that since English is not the first language of the students, it was important for them to learn English grammar at the college level to improve their communication skills and to boost up their confidence. Teachers therefore had to ensure that their students write in grammatically correct language for academic success. Following are three representative views:

Knowing grammar improves students' oral and written proficiency in language: when they know the grammar they do not face problem in speaking and writing, and they do well in real life communication.

When students learn grammar, they basically deal with the foundational structure of language. Our students are in need of understanding grammar fully. Competence in grammar enables them to gain proficiency in language.

At intermediate level, studying grammar is an opportunity for students to recall the grammatical knowledge they learnt in school in bits and pieces and make practical use of them: after having done their HSSC (Higher Secondary School Certificate), they join medical, engineering or law schools or any other professional college.

Some participants, however, believed that there are teachers who teach in a formulaic manner with a focus on definitions of grammatical terms in order to prepare students for examinations. Some teachers considered English grammar teaching secondary to language learning. One participant was of the opinion that grammar teaching was a necessary evil:

I believe that grammar is a necessary part of teaching and learning English language: it is a necessary evil because we need to have not only a sense of the grammar but also the knowledge of grammar. Teaching and learning grammar is important for teaching of English as a foreign language.

Showing his displeasure over teaching grammar, he had to say this:

Teaching English grammar is detrimental to language learning because from the early school level students are taught tenses, basic and complex sentence structure, voice and narration. Students from a very early time in their education are led to believe that the structure of the language matters more than the sense of language.

Interviews with the participants and observations of their classroom practices showed that traditional teaching methods were being followed to teach grammar. Teacher-centered lecture methods were employed and students were made to memorize certain constructions and examples mentioned in guides and notes. Some participants were of the view that the traditional way of teaching language was better because the number of students in the class is always big, students do not often understand new methods, modern day resources are not available in class rooms, and different multimedia aids are also scarce. According to them, language learning was not an end in itself: everything revolved around the preparation for the annual examination. Moreover, some concepts were repeatedly taught at the primary, middle and secondary school level which made the teaching and learning process monotonous and cumbersome.

Several teachers, however, believed that language is too complex a system to be learned or acquired by focusing on teaching of grammatical structures only; they were of the opinion that instead of teaching rules of the language, students should know about the functional aspect of grammar. There were others who believed that communicative grammar teaching should be practiced with a focus on integrating the four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) into grammar teaching. Following is a representative view:

Suppose we teach a student the art of piano. If we started telling him about the buttons, the correspondence of sounds to each button, and tell him about the make-up of piano, we will do nothing but waste our time.

According to him, the focus on the structure acquaints a student with the formal aspects of the language; however, it deprives him of the ability to use the target language in real life. He said that principles are extracted from language and not the other way around. The observation session, however, showed that the teacher himself taught grammar in the traditional manner indicating a mismatch between his claims and his actual classroom practices.

Here is another representative view:

I believe that the methodology of teaching English must be changed. I mean if we teach parts of speech we basically tell our students about the language or the grammatical structure of it. We do not really help them acquire that structure.

He believed that teaching grammar rules are an antithesis to authentic language teaching and that the target of teaching should not be rules of the language but the functions that language is supposed to serve: what is more important is to teach how language is used or spoken rather than how it exists. However, observation session was not in exact correspondence with his understanding of grammar teaching: he sprinkled his lectures with bits and pieces of grammar and practiced traditional grammar teaching like the rest of his colleagues. According to him, GTM hampers students' participation in the classroom:

GTM is knowingly or unknowingly followed. Students always are dumb and deaf through the lecture. Fluency in speaking cannot be achieved until we have discarded this method.

GTM, however, has its advantages too. Another participant had this to say:

The number of students per class has to be reduced for effective grammar and language teaching. We use lecture method because we teach a large class of 60-90 students.

While he believed that he employed Direct method, the observation sessions showed that he followed GTM in the class. So his philosophy contradicted his practice.

Participants argued that their method of teaching was shaped by how students are tested in the annual examination system. The grammar taught for examination purposes is too basic and formulaic in nature. Some teachers ignore teaching grammar altogether because the grammar portion counts for around twenty marks only. Emphasizing the approach to grammar teaching and learning, a participant told that:

We don't study grammar in detail; we only cover what we and the students expect to be on the exam paper. I teach grammar because it is part of the curriculum and students have to answer some grammar questions.

The interview and observation data revealed that English grammar teaching and learning at the intermediate level is overwhelmingly exam-centered. Hence, teachers and students adapt their teaching and learning in that direction and negatively impacts language learning and teaching process. This approach towards English teaching and learning does not serve the purpose in the classroom. English is being taught like other subjects to pass exams. While discussing it with the participants, it was revealed that grammar was detached from aspects of language. Moreover, grammar plays an important role in correcting spoken and written language but teachers were often unsuccessful in providing feedback to students.

Talking about the misunderstandings about English grammar, a participant opined:

Students think that grammatical rules are the essence of language learning. They have been made to believe it in schools. I think that this view has to be changed.

Grammar is not the essence of language teaching. However, teachers often make students think that the most important aspect of language is grammar, and it is not true. Language learning is a continuous activity and students' and teachers' views about language teaching and learning need to change. It is relevant to say that certain teachers themselves fail to speak English proficiently, and because of that students learn broken English. It is

mandatory for a teacher to be fluent, accurate and proficient in English in order to teach it well. They said that GTM is not the best method to teach English language.

Since conformity of practice to perception is important in successful teaching and learning environment instructors have to critically evaluate their performance for improvement. Self-assessment is a practical and necessary way of a teacher to improve not only his understanding but his method of teaching also. However, our investigation revealed that the participants of our study were lacking in self-assessment. They don't have the habit of discussing their practices and perceptions with each other. One of the participants said:

We do not reflect on teaching practices. All we are concerned with is to finish our courses in time. I stick to the basics because our students are extremely in English. I use GTM and I know that that is the best teaching methods to teach English to my students. I cannot think of using another method. I know that using a method other than GTM won't help my students in learning the language.

It is clear from the above excerpts that the participants underestimated the importance of self-reflection vis-à-vis teaching methodologies. There is thus a lack of awareness on their part about how important self-reflection is. In order for the teachers to improve their teaching of English language, there is a need of awareness among them about the best practices and knowledge of language. The annual time-span of teaching in Peshawar is usually 4-5 months; however, it can never be an excuse to avoid self-assessment and critical self-evaluation. Reflective practices can change teachers' perspectives about language and grammar teaching, which can result in effective teaching and learning in the classroom.

Discussion

According to this study, for more than 50 percent of the participants there was little or no alignment between their perceptions and the classroom practices. Certain teachers who thought that they used direct method in their classrooms actually used explicit grammar teaching method. Others advocated for input-oriented language teaching but practically used the traditional method of teaching. There were others who spoke in favour of

focusing on the functional aspects of grammar but actually employed GTM. In short, there was a contradiction between their perceptions and practices. However, there might be an explanation for it. The difference between teachers' perceptions and practices are aligned with Ferrel and Lim's (2005) findings who argued that the perceptions and actual practices of teachers might not be in conformity because of the problems related to context and teaching environment. The examination system, students' lack of language skills and poor classroom facilities were factors responsible for the lack of harmony between perception and practices. Argyris and Schon (1974, 1978) believed that consistency or discrepancy between teachers' reflections and their practices plays an important role in how language is taught. When teachers' beliefs and practices do not align, teaching and learning suffers greatly.

The findings of the study also indicated that perceptions influence teachers' pedagogical practices: teachers' beliefs and practices correlate with each other. This is in line with studies conducted by Landolsi (1997), Hassan (2013) and Kalsoom & Akhtar (2013) regarding correlation. The participants of this study deemed grammar teaching essential to language learning as a result of their own lack of exposure to the target language. Pedagogical practices of the participants of this study mainly aimed at making students perform well in the college examinations by scoring high marks which badly affected their language teaching as students could not develop good language skills. While Schon (1983) approves the alignment between perceptions and practices, he disapproves of exam-oriented teaching practices and objects to covering a list of topics because such approaches do not promote the cause of language teaching and learning in the classroom. Given that teachers do not engage in discussions with other teachers to improve their teaching practices, they fail to reflect and improve pedagogical skills and as a result students do not learn the language. That teachers' understanding of their teaching practices grows and expands when they share and discuss their experiences and practices with colleagues was born out Ashraf and Rareiya (2008). The analysis of teachers' perceptions and practices also revealed that the participants' pedagogical practices were negatively impacted by the context and environment in which they taught and ignored the contradictions between their perceptions and practices.

Our study also showed that many teachers practiced explicit grammar teaching i.e.

teaching of grammatical rules and structures. Majority of participants advocated this method as they thought that examinations required students to memorize definitions rather than know the structures and the rules. The existing examination system tested students' writing and reading skills only; teachers and students thus had to rely on conventional ways of teaching and learning. This view is in line with Nazari (2012) who believed that explicit teaching practices improve students' listening and speaking skills and ensure their academic success. Sik (2015), Uysal and Yavuz (2015) reinforced the same point and underscored that this kind of grammar teaching played an important role in improving students' linguistic competence and academic success. Uysal and Bardakci (2014) conversely argued that local contextual factors compel teacher to teach grammar explicitly. With regards to effective grammar teaching, Besoz (2014) preferred implicit grammar teaching focusing on real communication practices that improve learner's prowess.

The present study shows that the participants of this study find themselves less innovative and less dynamic due to several contextual factors. The teachers stick to traditional practices, which may be right for examination purposes but do not serve the purpose of language learning: to communicate effectively. Effective teaching and learning of language, according to Schon (1983), does not happen when the sole focus is on covering material for exams or when the target is success at the academic front only.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the alignment between teachers' perceptions and their actual classroom pedagogical practices in district Peshawar. The findings revealed that students are repeatedly taught the same material at college level what they had already learnt at school level: without having access to new knowledge. The perceptions of teachers were analyzed with respect to the importance of grammar teaching in the classroom. The study investigated the practices and philosophies of teachers, concluding that there was a discrepancy between what they thought and what they practiced. Since it is necessary to teach grammar at intermediate level, teaching of language needs to be summed up in four language skills. The best way to make teaching practices useful is to adopt an eclectic approach towards teaching of English in general and grammar in particular.

In short, curriculum-based and exam-oriented teaching of English language needs to be replaced with language-oriented and skills-based teaching and learning at the intermediate level. Changing topics for discussion alone may not result in effective language teaching or learning at the intermediate level. For a thorough understanding of the effectiveness of grammar teaching as part of language learning, an investigation into students' perceptions may bring new insights with rich pedagogical implications.

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