

## Grammar Teachers' Beliefs and Teaching Practices: Implications for Teacher Education Programs

معتقدات مدرسي النحو وممارسات التدريس: الآثار المترتبة على برامج تكوين المدرسين

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### Abstract:

The area of studying teachers' beliefs and teaching practices is receiving increasing attention in teacher education. Teaching beliefs play a major influencing role in making decisions about teaching and learning to teach. The current study discusses studies on grammar teachers' beliefs, teaching practices, and teacher training programs. Its aim is to highlight insights and implications in light of past findings that may inspire teachers and training program developers to take them into account for future training to achieve quality education through effective teaching practices.

**Key words:** beliefs; teacher education; grammar; training programs; effective teaching.

### الملخص

يحظى مجال دراسة معتقدات المعلمين وممارسات التدريس باهتمام متزايد في تكوين المدرسين. تلعب معتقدات التدريس دوراً رئيسياً ومؤثراً في اتخاذ القرارات بشأن التدريس وتعلم التدريس. تناقش هذه الدراسة الدراسات السابقة حول معتقدات مدرسي النحو، ممارسات التدريس، وبرامج تكوين المدرسين. الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو تسليط الضوء على الأفكار والآثار المتعلقة بمعتقدات المدرسين في تدريس مقياس النحو على ضوء تحليل نتائج دراسات سابقة والتي قد تلهم المدرسين ومطوري برامج التكوين لأخذها في الاعتبار في برامج التكوين المستقبلية من أجل المساهمة في تحقيق تعليم جيد من خلال ممارسات التدريس الفعالة. الكلمات المفتاحية: المعتقدات؛ تكوين المدرس؛ النحو؛ برامج تكوينية؛ التدريس الفعال.

### Introduction

As teachers of English grammar, we usually ask questions related to how better we can communicate and transmit rules of grammar to students. In fact, in many cases, it can be a difficult and a challenging task to teach grammar especially to English as a foreign language (EFL) student. Explanation alone cannot always ensure understanding and mastery, hence, successful learning.

In EFL teaching contexts, the grammar-teaching situation might be challenging especially for novice teachers who may not possess the necessary knowledge and skills

related to theories, approaches and methods of English language teaching, in general, and of grammar teaching, in particular. Many teachers of grammar might not even possess knowledge related to the traditional and the modern approaches to teaching English grammar. In such a case, we cannot raise the question of being creative and innovative in our teachings of grammar if one does not even possess knowledge and skills related to the different theories of teaching and the different approaches to teaching grammar.

Knowledge related to language theories as well as to approaches and methods of teaching grammar is the first step towards informative and effective teaching practices. Such type of knowledge is highly required since it helps teachers to plan their teaching. In other words, such knowledge is a necessary pre-requisite for teaching practices decision making.

In light of some issues that both students and teachers face in grammar teaching and learning, we believe that a major focus should be directed towards the beliefs that grammar teachers hold about teaching and learning to teach. This, in turn, calls for raising questions about training novice teachers of grammar. The reason behind that is because knowledge and skills in teaching represent the first step towards effective teaching and learning. If the teaching fails, then learning may also fail. In other words, we cannot talk about successful learning in the absence of effective teaching.

Our interest in the area of teachers' beliefs, teaching practices and teacher education developed as we started to explore research about best teacher's teaching practices and teacher education. Interest and awareness about the central importance of this area of research raised through readings of studies that raised claims about questioning and examining teachers' beliefs, teaching practices and teacher education.

### **1- Language Knowledge and Classroom Practice in Teaching Grammar**

Interest in teaching English grammar can be fascinating for any language teacher. Being qualified to teach the subject requires, however, great knowledge and skills which develop through time. Teachers of English grammar should be teachers and researchers at the same time. One of the first points that a teacher should focus on is to thoroughly study and research how to approach the teaching of grammar. Some studies focused mainly on aspects related to theory and, hence, were of a descriptive nature (Peck, 1988). Studies related to the actual teaching practices of grammar in EFL contexts were, and are, still rare.

In the few last decades, research used to focus on teaching (process) or learning (product). Little attention was directed towards teachers and their mental lives (Freeman, 2002). It is now well established that teachers' cognition, reflected by their teaching beliefs, play a significant role in their teaching practices.

Moreover, previous attention used not to be placed on the 'what' and the 'how' teachers teach. Despite the fact that teachers might use textbooks of grammar to guide them in teaching the grammar subject, this can in no way be considered as a relief both to the teacher and the learner. A deep scrutiny of Algerian EFL grammar teachers' practices may clearly reveal the fact that most, if not all, teachers of grammar use textbooks in their teaching without any prior training in teaching grammar. What might be more astonishing, though, is the fact that when teachers get their Magistere or Doctorate degree, they may think that they can teach anything without any further studies or teacher training.

Grammar teaching practices of novice and experienced teachers need an ongoing investigation. It is only in doing research (questionnaire, observation, teaching journals) that we may reach a clear understanding of the teaching situation, and hence, may contribute to the understanding of teachers' beliefs, knowledge, needs, challenges and actual instructional practices.

In the absence of research about EFL grammar teachers' perspectives on their teaching practices and classroom decisions, a serious gap in teacher education and teachers' knowledge of grammar in language teaching continues to surface. The main aim of this research is, then, to address this gap of teacher's education vis-à-vis the teaching of grammar. Discussion centers mainly around teachers' beliefs, teaching practices and teacher training.

Grammar teacher education should focus on the different types of knowledge that they should possess, the approaches to teaching grammar, and the challenges and needs of teachers of grammar, especially pre-service and in-service teachers in light of research studies. Discussion of teacher training has implications for future training for Algerian EFL teachers of grammar, especially teacher training schools, including the Ecole Normale Supérieure-Assia Djébar-Constantine.

The issue of teacher education in light of knowledge base of teachers in teaching grammar gained serious attention in different research studies (Johnston & Goettsch, 2000). Knowledge base covers different things including teachers' knowledge about language, their beliefs about language and their actual practices in teaching as reflected by their held beliefs. Knowledge base of language teachers has also been a major focus of many research (Andrews, 2001 ; Borg, 2001).

In the present study, focus is placed on teachers' beliefs and knowledge about language, mainly in grammar teaching. This knowledge involves teachers' attitudes and knowledge related to grammar. That is to say, it is related to grammar teachers' knowledge and teaching practices (Borg, 2005). More specifically, focus of the paper is placed on examining research related to teachers' beliefs and teachers' training to

become effective teachers of English grammar. The overall aim of which is to come to a better understanding of teachers' knowledge and teaching practices in order to help provide teacher training programs for Algerian EFL teachers at the Ecole Normale Supérieure-Assia Djébar-Constantine.

## **2- Perspectives in Teaching Grammar**

In EFL teaching contexts, the teaching of grammar has always attracted attention and raised continuous debates. Teachers may adopt different teaching approaches and methods ranging from form-focused instruction, meaning-focused instruction, task-based instruction and so on. These methods of grammar teaching have their own merits and drawbacks, and only in light of fully understanding them that grammar teachers can decide how grammar can be better approached.

The area of grammar teaching is of central importance to language learning, but it is claimed to be full of controversy (Larsen Freeman, 2001). In traditional teaching, grammar has always been considered as a subject necessary to provide learners with grammatical knowledge to develop their grammatical competence only. This used to be considered essential for language learning and language use.

The teaching of grammar in EFL contexts has undergone different phases and, hence, has witnessed different changes. Different approaches to language teaching were advanced and studies were conducted in order to explore their effectiveness in grammar teaching. There was no consent about how grammar should be taught as a central aspect of language teaching/learning. Contradictory opinions about which approach should be best adopted in teaching grammar in English language teaching (ELT) were always present.

## **3- Grammar Teachers' Teaching Beliefs and Teaching Practices**

Teachers' beliefs refer to a group of norms and opinions that the individual teacher gained through his/her teaching experiences. They reflect the overlapping thoughts that the teacher has about the teaching and the learning to teach process. In other words, the beliefs that teachers hold are attributes and values about teaching students and the teaching process that teachers bring to classroom. Teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning to teach may have significant influence on teaching practices and classroom decisions (Ford, 1994).

Studies that explore teachers' beliefs are necessary to understand how they conceptualize their teaching practices. These beliefs are 'personal constructs' that reflect how teachers teach and make decisions about their teaching (Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001). That is why a deep understanding of teachers' teaching practices requires a prior understanding of teachers' beliefs and the principles that guide their

teaching. In other words, change in beliefs is prior to change in teaching practices (Golombek, 1998).

Teachers' beliefs come from three major sources: personal experience of the teacher, teaching and the teacher's experience as a student and teacher's knowledge of the school courses (Richardson, 1996). In a synthesis of studies about teachers' beliefs (Pajares, 1992), findings showed that there is a strong relationship between teachers' pedagogical beliefs, the planning of their teaching and the overall classroom decisions. In the same line of thought, other studies emphasized Pajares (1992) findings by claiming that teachers' beliefs have a strong impact on teachers' teaching practices. Beliefs are converted into a practical reality.

The notion of change involves a series of aspects. It involves teachers' awareness. It is also something that is neither immediate nor complete. Change is actually a process that occurs over time (Freeman, 1989).

Focus on pre-service and in-service grammar teachers' beliefs is a central dimension in their professional careers. Teacher education programs should be developed to provide teachers with rich opportunities to learn. Teachers, in their turn, should seek thoughtful and positive change in their teaching. Change is a central part in teaching and it is a distinguishing characteristic that reflects teachers' career growth, and which forms an ongoing goal in teachers' education (Pennington, 1990).

In a research reviewing the teaching of grammar, Borg (1999) found that there is a complete absence of a consensus from previous research about the best teaching practices in second language grammar teaching. Research focus shifted, then, to focus on teacher cognition. There was a serious call for this shift and attempts were made to emphasize the importance of exploring teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar. This type of understanding is always necessary since it helps in making informative decisions about teacher education (programs) in order to improve the teaching and the learning of grammar especially in EFL contexts.

Other studies that explored teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar confirmed Borg's (1999) findings. A survey of one hundred and twenty six in-service teachers was conducted to explore their beliefs about language teaching. The results showed that most teachers focused on the teaching of grammar (Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001). Such results suggest that there is a need for an ongoing exploration of pre-service teachers' beliefs about teaching in order to take them into due consideration in their professional training. Teacher training programs should be developed in light of teachers' knowledge, needs, and challenges in order to help them change the quality of their teaching practices and improve students' learning. Change, in this sense, is positive

and can have multifaceted aspects including : knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, understanding, self-awareness and teaching practices (Bailey, 1992).

Other studies supported Richards, Gallo and Renandaya (2001) findings. Teachers' views about grammar teaching were explored in many studies (Brumfit, Mitchell & Hooper, 1996). The findings of these studies, inter alia, showed that grammar teachers held the same beliefs about teaching grammar in the same way they were taught as they were students. That is to say, teachers were pre-disposed to teach grammar the way others taught them in high school or at university (Clark and Peterson, 1986). More precisely, grammar is taught in an explicit manner using a sentence-based method. What is more is the fact that despite the presence of second language acquisition theories, the latter seem to have little impact on changing teaching practices and guiding teachers towards the adoption of better approaches and methods in teaching grammar.

In another interesting study that explored teachers' beliefs about the teaching of grammar, Andrews (2006) examined the evolution of Teacher Language Awareness (TLA) in relation to three experienced English teachers' grammar knowledge. The same three teachers were involved in a TLA study in their early years of teaching. After ten years of teaching experience, the study showed striking findings : the three teachers' knowledge of grammar and their beliefs about grammar teaching did not largely change.

From the findings of these studies, we can say that teachers' grammar knowledge and beliefs about grammar teaching are tacit and can be difficult to change. Teachers might adhere to the way grammar was taught to them when they were students, and this may have a major impact on them as teachers. This actually reflects a total absence of an informative teacher education and calls for well planned and well developed teacher training programs in order to help teachers, especially EFL teachers, overcome previous experiences in teaching grammar and help them develop their knowledge and understanding of 'what' and 'how' grammar should be taught. Teacher training programs are believed to be central, especially for pre-service and in-service teachers, to change their teaching knowledge, beliefs and practices towards the better.

#### **4- Teachers' Teaching Practices and Teacher Training Programs**

Teachers' teaching practices can change due to several reasons. One of the main causes of teachers' beliefs, knowledge, skills and, hence teaching practices' change is that of teacher education programs (Jackson, 1992). Vonk (1991) described the process of change by stating that,

At certain moments a coherent set of changes occurs in teachers' thinking about the profession and in their conduct. These changes are both qualitative and quantitative in nature. Such a development, however, is not a simple, spontaneous process; it is rather the outcome of a complex interaction

between the individuals and the various environments in which they are participating. (p. 64)

In other words, change in teachers' beliefs and teaching practices involves a set of complex interactions of different factors. One major factor that leads to change is that of teacher education and teacher training programs. Receiving a training in language theories, teaching approaches, methods, principles and so on, is central to shaping teaching beliefs and teaching practices.

Many studies were conducted to investigate the impact of teacher training education on developing teacher's cognition in the teaching of the English language. A review by Kagan (1992, cited in Borg, 2003) showed that teacher education plays a central role in changing teachers' beliefs. Teacher's trainings are claimed to have effects on changing teachers' beliefs and teaching practices.

In a case study of an ESL teacher who received pre-service teacher training, Borg (1998) found that the training had a positive impact on the teacher's teaching. Borg (1998) also pointed out that training can be effective due to a variety of reasons including the short duration of the teacher's training (4 weeks), the practical focus of the program, the reflexive nature of the trainers' own practice and so on. This study suggested that further research needs to be conducted to explore the processes that teachers go through when making grammar teaching decisions since they can have a great impact on providing effective language teachers' training programs. In another study conducted by Freeman (1993) about in-service teachers, findings showed a change in teachers' beliefs, attitudes and thinking. The teachers learned, analyzed and applied in practice the knowledge that they gained from the teacher training that they received.

One of the main steps to consider when developing language or grammar training programs is the beliefs that grammar teachers hold about the teaching of grammar. It is only in this way that the teacher training program can have an impact on changing teachers' beliefs. In other words, discussing teachers' inner ideas can shed light on central points that need deep reflection and focus. To use Richards, Gallo and Renandaya's (2001) words, "professional development that engages teachers in a direct exploration of their beliefs and principles may provide the opportunity for greater self-awareness through reflection and critical questioning as starting points for later adaptation" (p. 12).

In another study about pre-service teachers (Farrell, 1999), the participants were asked to complete a reflection assignment that involved the following points : a) an account of their language learning experience, b) design a grammar lesson plan and teach it, and c) reflections before, during and after the grammar lesson. The findings showed that by reflecting on their experiences as learners and teachers, pre-service

teachers could know, recognize, identify and analyze their beliefs. This helped teachers to change them in order to have a positive impact on their teaching practices. Basturkmen (2012) emphasized the fact that teachers have their own framework of beliefs. Beliefs reflect teaching practices and influence instructional decisions.

It is, hence, argued that reflective inquiry has an important value in the professional development of language teachers. Reflections allow teachers to make their ideas and beliefs clear and explicit. In this way, they can understand their teaching experiences and work to achieve self-efficacy and change their own learning and teaching practices towards the better. Teachers' narratives (teachers' teaching journals) can also be of great benefit to know what teachers think and know about teaching grammar.

Teacher's training programs can, hence, have a major effect on teachers' beliefs and practices. Understanding grammar teachers' teaching beliefs and practices can help plan, design and develop effective training programs to help teachers improve their learning and teaching quality. Using teachers' reflection and narratives can help teachers to reflect upon their inner beliefs and ideas. This helps teachers to identify and analyze them. In light of newly gained knowledge and skills, teachers can change their grammar teaching beliefs and practices.

Since teacher training programs have a positive impact on changing teachers' beliefs about teaching, their knowledge and teaching practices, effective teacher training programs should provide teachers with professional knowledge and experience. They should push teachers to reflect upon their inner beliefs about teaching. One good way to know about teachers' knowledge, beliefs and practices is through asking them to write a teacher's journal throughout the year in order to understand their teaching practices and the ideas underlying them. After introducing teacher training programs, the same teachers can be asked to write a journal throughout their training and teaching year to explore changes in their beliefs, understanding and teaching of grammar. This should be given a high priority especially at Teacher Training Schools in Algeria since the latter are claimed to provide high quality education to future teachers.

#### **5- Recommendations and Implications for Future Teacher Training Programs**

Teachers' beliefs are of central importance and needs careful and continuous investigation in order to understand different teaching practices. One of the central points that one should focus on is the cognitive development of teachers knowledge and skills (Borg, 2003). Focus on teachers' beliefs implies the introduction of teacher training programs. We cannot raise questions of change in teaching practice in the absence of teachers' training programs. The aim of any teacher training program is to have a positive impact on teachers for purposes of changing teaching practices towards



more informative and effective teachings. Classroom practice should always be explored and examined accordingly.

What can also be more interesting, though, is the fact that teachers' beliefs do not usually reflect their actual practices in class. In a study conducted by Farrell and Lim (2005), findings showed that there were differences between what teachers hold as beliefs and what they actually do in class. Such kind of 'divergence' (Freeman, 2002) is related to a variety of factors like curriculum requirements and expectations, time constraints and so on. The presence of similar divergence between beliefs and actual practices should also receive attention.

Teaching practices in different situations need serious investigation to understand the complexity of classroom practices. Teachers may hold unconscious, even wrong, beliefs and attitudes about the teaching of a given subject like that of grammar. They may believe that traditional grammar instruction is, for instance, the most effective way of teaching grammar and, hence, adhere to it in their teaching practices. This can be a major factor influencing the teaching and the learning of grammar, especially in EFL contexts. Being unaware of their unconscious inner beliefs about the teaching of grammar results in a kind of random instruction. In other words, effective teaching of grammar requires critical reflection and questioning.

Decisions about which method to use in teaching grammar, or any other subject, should be made in light of certain factors like the classroom environment, the teaching resources and the methods of evaluation. Decision about the methods of teaching should be made in light of theories and methods of language teaching within an educational policy. We can adopt Kaplan and Baldauf's (1997) model that emphasizes the following policies:

- Method Policy : It deals with questions of language teaching method ;
- Materials Policy : It deals with questions of textbooks and other sources for language teaching and learning ;
- Curriculum Policy : It deals with the goals and content of language teaching and learning ;
- Assessment Policy: It deals with what is to be assessed and how.

The following assumptions (Richards, Gallo, Renandya, 2001) should be carefully considered in a teacher training program for teachers' professional development purposes:

- Teachers' beliefs play a central role in the process of teacher development ;
- Changes in teachers' practices are the result of changes in teachers' beliefs ;
- The notion of teachers' change is multidimensional and is triggered both by personal factors as well as by the professional contexts in which teachers work.

There are also major points that future research should consider about grammar teachers' beliefs and teacher training programs. The following contextual factors reflect a central research gap and, hence, need to be addressed :

- a. The factors that may cause divergence between grammar teachers' beliefs and classroom practice (Farrell and Lim, 2005)
- b. Non-native, especially pre-service and in-service, teachers' grammar teaching practices in light of the curriculum (Borg, 2003)
- c. Teachers' unconscious, tacit and inner beliefs about teaching, in general, and the teaching of grammar, in particular (Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver, & Thwaite, 2001)
- d. Teachers' teaching reflection in the articulation of their tacit knowledge and beliefs about teaching grammar as a central factor in classroom practice.
- e. Teachers' tendencies in using specific approaches to teaching grammar (deductive, inductive, communicative)
- f. The underlying ideas that guide grammar teachers' decisions about approaches and methods in teaching grammar.
- g. Conducting exploratory-interpretive research about grammar teaching practices (Grotjahn, 1987), since this will reflect a commitment to the understanding of the perspectives of actions and practices.
- h. Future research can use qualitative and quantitative approaches to understand teaching beliefs as reflected by actual practices, like the use of: Diary writing, observations, post lesson reflections and so on.
- i. Future research can use verbal report methods like the think aloud technique to report teachers' beliefs (Fang, 1996)

The following points are key recommendations to consider when developing a teacher training program for grammar teachers teacher training schools in Algeria :

- a. Teaching and learning to teach effectively involves complex process (Clark & Peterson, 1986) and, hence, should be investigated in a constant manner.
- b. Beliefs of teachers about teaching are the best indicators of the decisions that individuals should make through their teaching career and, hence they should always be explored and examined (Bandura, 1986 ; Dewey, 1933).
- c. Studies about teachers' beliefs should be the focus of any institution or research teams ; nowadays research attention is highly directed to teacher effectiveness research and quality education (Fenstermacher, 1979)
- d. Research should focus on understanding the central role that teachers' beliefs and conceptions play in teaching practice (Pajares, 1992)

- e. Courses in a language teacher training program should include both knowledge about language and methodology (Borg, 2005)
- f. Focus should be placed on the underlying methodological principles from which teaching practices are derived.
- g. Providing foundational knowledge about the teaching grammar in light of linguistic theories, language acquisition theories' development, teaching (assessment) approaches and methods.
- h. Highlighting traditional methods of teaching grammar (decontextualized, sentence-based) and discourse based grammar (contextualized, authentic materials)

Teacher education programs have always been central to teachers' professional development. Teacher training provides teachers with opportunities to make their ideas, thoughts and beliefs explicit. This provides room for discussion, formal and informal feedback from experts and interaction with collaborators. The following four points reflect collaborators' (experts) contribution to help teachers change their beliefs and teaching practices (Jackson, 1992, pp. 64-67).

- Tell teachers how to teach ;
- Improve the conditions under which they work ;
- Relieve them of psychological discomfort and help them come to terms with the demands of their work ;
- Help teachers come to a broader and richer understanding of what they do.

In addition to collaborators, Bailey (1992, p. 271) identified six other catalysts for a need for teacher's change. They involve :

- Dissatisfaction with the current situation
- The connection of a new idea with the teacher's own situation
- A change in the teaching context
- Life changes and personal growth which led to professional development
- A realization of something based on his or her experiences as a learner
- A conflict between the teacher's new beliefs and their practices

In their study about the key sources of change in teachers' beliefs, Richards, Gallo, Renandya (2001) gave teachers a list of sources to choose from. The findings showed that the main four sources of change in teachers' beliefs are the following :

- In-service courses
- Seminars, conferences
- Student feedback
- Self-discovery

All in all, we can say that teacher education programs play a major role in teachers' lives. Research about teachers' beliefs should be one of the main focuses of educational research since it can inform educational practices.

### **Conclusion**

The present study presented a synthesis of some studies that investigated grammar teachers' beliefs about teaching. This research area is of central importance since, in the Algerian EFL contexts, there seems to be a great absence of well developed teacher training programs directed either to pre-service or in-service teachers, especially at the Ecole Normale Supérieure-Assia Djébar-Constantine. Teachers who are given the subject of grammar to teach to undergraduate Algerian EFL students, which are also would be teachers, are not trained or equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to teach the subject. This is the situation of novice and experienced teachers who are either not specialized in grammar teaching or who have not received any teacher education and training in teaching grammar.

Teaching grammar can be a challenging task for many EFL teachers who may face several problems and issues of teaching in their daily classes. Designing and developing effective and relevant teacher training program for novice Algerian EFL teachers of grammar will help them overcome the knowledge and skills' burden that they may have when teaching the subject of grammar for the first time in their teaching profession. The training program should provide the theoretical foundations in teaching grammar in light of linguistic theories and language acquisition theories' development. Knowledge of such theories plays a central role in making decisions about the different teaching approaches and methods to teaching language.

This research provided an overview of studies that emphasized the central importance of teachers' beliefs, teaching practices and teacher education. It also suggested areas of research interest and highlighted key implications for understanding university teachers' practices and raised a call for the necessity of teacher education and professional development programs. The paper concluded with directions for future research.

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