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TESL Trainee' Attitudes towards Teaching Grammar in Malaysian Secondary Schools

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Abstract:
Historically, English language arts educators have strongly disagreed about the role of grammar instruction in students' literacy development (Weaver, 1996; Mulroy, 2003), and despite the importance of teachers' attitudes and the continuing controversy over grammar instruction, few studies have explored TESL trainees' attitudes about the role of grammar instruction in English language arts education. The purpose of this qualitative, interpretive research was to investigate 15TESL (teaching English as Second Language)trainee' attitudes and practices related to grammar and the teaching of grammar. The main instrument for collecting data in this study was in depth interview. The finding were emerged through qualitative analysis.

Keywords: TESL trainee, teaching grammar, attitudes

1. Introduction

The term "grammar" may be defined in many ways. Grammar is the essence of language. Whenever any person speaks or writes, he or she uses grammar in one way or another because each language and dialect has its own set of unwritten rules that determine how it is spoken or written (McWhorter, 1998). Many scholars define grammar using traditional terms. Traditional grammar includes definitions of parts of speech and rules for using them in sentence construction. It is sometimes called "prescriptive" because it relies on rules to determine correct "usage" (Noguchi, 1991; Weaver, 1996; Mulroy, 2003; Schuster, 2003). As Williams (1999) suggests, "In nearly every instance, school grammar is traditional grammar. It is concerned primarily with correctness and with the categorical names for the words that make up sentences" (p. 5).

2. Review of Literature

Grammar teaching holds a crucial role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, as without good command of grammar, the language use will be constrained. Teaching grammar is basically teaching the language rules, also known as the sentence patterns, which are essential to define meaning and use. For the decades, grammar teaching has been through some debates which can be described at the following discussion.

As my review of the history and scholarship on grammar instruction has shown, many varying definitions of grammar exist in the field of English language arts education. Hartwell (1985) discussed five meanings of "grammar," some of which were clarifications of the work of W. Nelson Francis. Grammar 1 is the grammar in our heads. Grammar 2 is the linguistic branch that studies, formal language patterns. Grammar 3 is "linguistic etiquette," but Hartwell defines it as usage, "Grammar 3 is, of course, not grammar at all, but usage" (p. 110). Grammar 4 is the grammar used in schools. Grammar 5 is the stylized grammar used in writing. The participants in the current study defined grammar in terms of rules, but they sometimes blurred the distinction between rules and usage. The rules they are referring to are those found in school grammar, or Hartwell's Grammar 4, but they frequently link the rules closely to usage, or Hartwell's Grammar 3. In addition to linking rules and usage, they also combined grammar and communication. Hartwell's Grammar 5 deals with teaching and understanding writing in that it, "Helps students use their met linguistic knowledge, their conscious knowledge of Grammar 1, to convey meaning and purpose" (Patterson, 2001, p. 53). The communication link the teachers saw between grammar and writing may be found in Hartwell's Grammar 5.

3. Research Design

Research design represents the structure that guides the execution of research and procedures of data analysis (Embark, 2011). Bryman (2008) explains that it encompasses the methods used for analysing data and for reporting research findings and conclusions.

Selection of research method in a research requires identifying the problem, selecting the sample, designing of measurements and accounting for accessibility issues (Cohen et al 2007; Bryman, 2008).

The prominent characteristics of qualitative research are explained by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) in "an introduction to the handbook of qualitative research (3rd edition)". So, one of the most important reasons of putting the main focus on conducting this study qualitatively is because qualitative approach captures the participants' point of view in a detailed way through personal interviews and observation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Fraenkel et al., (2012) also believe qualitative research should be conducted when the researcher is interested in getting an in-depth look at a specific situation or particular individuals. According to Bogden and Biklen (1998), to examine a phenomenon qualitatively means to "understand the meaning of the events and interactions of ordinary people in particular situations" (p. 23). Therefore, the main goal of qualitative research is to examine a specific topic in its context, looking to better understand the behavior of participants from their point of view (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Erickson, 1986) and the subjective aspects of people's behaviors. In addition, the nature of qualitative research ensures rich description of the social and personal worlds of the participants, which is also important to understanding the complex nature of attitude systems (Bryan, 2001).

Fraenkel et al (2012) also believes a qualitative researcher wishes to know more than just "to what extent" or "how well". A qualitative researcher aspires to illuminate meaning onto "the unique milieu of the study as part and parcel of a larger context to gain a fuller, more ecological attitude of the individual's abilities, traits, behavior, and knowledge" (Duff, 2008, p. 38). It calls for the researcher to enter the lives of the individuals being studied so the meaning of things (experiences, objects, and events) in a person's life comes from the interpretation given to it by that person (Marshall and Rossman, 2006; Uludag, 2005).

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) draw a distinction between the Qualitative and Quantitative research. They believe that qualitative investigators can get closer to the actor's perspective and attitudes through detailed interviewing and observation while quantitative researchers are "seldom able to capture their subjects' perspectives because they have to rely on more remote, inferential empirical methods and materials" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 16). Hence, quantitative survey methods fail to describe the interaction among attitudes, experiences, and actions (Brookhart and Freeman, 1992; Richardson, 1996). Thus, teacher attitudes, classroom actions, and the nature of the process of learning to teach will be possible by the use of qualitative studies (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996).

The different tenets discussed above steered the present study mainly in the direction of a qualitative approach. As long as the main aim of this study is to investigate the attitudes of Malaysian TESL trainee towards teaching grammar, the qualitative approach is founded most suitable in view of providing an approach for studying interconnections of TESL trainee' attitudes and practices while situated in their teaching practice in their third year of study. Hence, 15 participants who were in 3rd year of Bachelor of Arts majoring in TESL (Teaching English as Second Language) at one of the public universities of Malaysia were chosen as the participants of the current study.

4. Analysis

The results of the questions in both interviews (On average how much time do you dedicate to grammar teaching in each session? Or in a week? And How do you teach grammar? Do you encourage your students to become aware of grammar rules or you encourage your students to discover grammatical rules themselves? If yes Why? How?) revealed that eight of the participants thought grammar should be taught both deductively and inductively. The following extracts show this issue.

4.1. AM's First and Second Interview

S; Start with direct to make them interest and teach them and indirectly use grammar in clt
S; I teach students to become aware, explicitly because the class i get is low proficiency so i must show them the rules

4.2. AI's Second Interview

S; If it is something that the students did not know before i will let them to learn the theory first and then let them to practices or discover those grammar in a text for example but if those things they are already used it but they do not know realize its acts it is actually like present continuous tense i will let them to expose to sounds of text with those elements and let them to realise those tense and then i will tell them oh this is actually present continuous so indirectly

4.3. MSI's Second Interview

S; yes always {students become aware of grammatical rules}because sometimes indirectly teaching during comprehensions when there is text or passage when there is some sentences that they do not know very ask why the sentence become like that
R; So you mean that you use both of them directly and indirectly?
S; Yes yes

4.4. SP's Second Interview

S; yes I give them input section {deductive} and worksheet then {inductive}
R; Do you encourage your students to become aware of grammar rules or you encourage your students to discover grammatical rules themselves?
S; they should be aware than discover themselves
However, AI, SP and AM did not teach grammar during the times I observed their classrooms but MaiSRh completely used the deductive (direct) method by writing the roles on the board in a very traditional method.

Some of the participants believe the way of teaching grammar either directly (deductive) or indirectly (inductive) depends on the students' performance. Interestingly some of them preferred indirect teaching for high proficiency students and direct teaching for low proficiency students while one of the participants argued for indirect teaching for low level students and vice verse. The following two extracts clearly express different views of the participants on teaching grammar for students with different level of English proficiency.

4.5. SI's First Interview Line 51-56
S; I prefer direct method. The students just only need to learn the theory of the grammar and then the teachers give them as much examples as possible to increase their understanding. From this, they can easily construct the other examples. However, this depends on situation. The direct method can be used in low English proficiency class while the high English proficiency class is suit to use indirect methods because they will go through the examples and therefore they will figure out and know the theory of the grammar
Through the observation of SI's real classroom, we (I and the supervisor) found she taught grammar very deductively during an input session in a traditional way but she used very interesting games and activities after giving input to avoid traditional and boring classes as she experienced during her school time.

4.6. TY's First and Second Interview
S: If i am teaching a good class i think it is good to teach them directly, but if it is not a good class, maybe we have not much tell them about such language and maybe it won't work and in this term it is better to teach them indirectly
The same as Si Na, HF thought students with high level of proficiency should be taught indirectly, but high proficient students asked her to put more focus on grammar and teach grammar directly. However, HF did not like to make a boring class for students by teaching grammar directly, but the differences in her first and second interview showed she finally decided to teach grammar directly. This is reflected in HF's first and second interviews illustrated below.

4.7. HF's First and Second Interview
S; I love to teach grammar indirectly because as much as i concern about fluency as much as accuracy that fluency should be over accuracy, so it should be indirectly for advance students for high proficiency students since they have that proficient in their language they asked me to focus more on grammar teaching. I have that focus a little bit in my teaching
R; So u teach them directly you mean?
S; I am still thinking of how to do it. Directly but not very boring because when I teach grammar directly i think it is a little bit boring
R; How do you teach grammar?
S; Directly by showing them the form subject verb etc.
R; Do you encourage your students to become aware of grammar rules or you encourage your students to discover grammatical rules themselves?
S; Yes
The differences in interviewees responds between the first and second interview were also indicated by Shirely. Although in first interview "Sh"stated she prefers teaching grammar directly, in the second interview she stated that she asked students to discover grammar rules 4 of the participants believed they teach grammar directly. The following extracts show the attitudes of participants who teach grammar directly by making the students become aware of grammatical rules. Ash was one of the fans of direct teaching and showed this in her teaching practicum.

4.8. Ash's Second Interview
S; i choose to let them become aware of grammar rules because i think if you aware you always remember what to do but if you discover by youself sometime you let it go and slip off in that case
3 of the participants state that they teach grammar indirectly but in my view they still teach it directly. The reason that they believe they teach grammar indirectly was because of not having a special time for grammar and during doing the exercise they corrected the students' mistakes directly and let them became aware of the grammar rules. The differences between teaching grammars directly and indirectly have been discussed in details in chapter 2. In my view none of the participants show any items of teaching grammar indirectly even though they believe on it. for example SR said

4.9. SR's Second Interview
S; I think on average I do not teach grammar that much because we are not allowed to teach only grammar we have to teach indirectly
S; I think I encourage them to be aware of grammar rules
R; How?
S; for example, when we are doing the activity, writing activity, I asked them to write on the board and then I correct the grammatical mistakes
On my view, the above extracts show although she said she taught grammar indirectly, her explanation about encourage students to become aware of grammatical rules and correct students grammatical mistakes on the board shows the way of teaching directly while inductively is where the learners are presented examples first then to generate rules and make generalizations. I didn't see any of these ways in interviews' transcriptions and observations. Similarly the following extracts show the TESL trainee' misconceptions about teaching grammar indirectly.

4.10. ALJ's First and Second Interviews Differences
S; Examples sometimes when they have some errors, i will write the errors on whiteboard and explain the grammar so indirectly, i didn't do the grammar activities so i will correct them during the exercise
S; R; Do you encourage your students to become aware of grammar rules or you encourage your students to discover grammatical rules themselves?
S; Usually I became them aware of the grammar rules
R; Why? How?
S; Because whenever they say some words and errors I listed those errors and I asked them remind them this is not the way you are saying I just indirectly teaching the grammar
R; but before you said directly?
S; not directly how to say because I don't have specific grammar class. I am following the skim of words if I finish syllabus without the grammar class, then I will teach grammar during other lesson in the class. Even in reading if there is any errors just tell them

4.11. NRJ's First Interview
S: when we teaching when I am teaching newspaper report I said them you must use past tense that is how i introduce them past tense
S; I encourage students to become aware of the grammatical rules
R; ok can you give me an example?
S; for example, sometimes I do group work and then I asked them to write on the paper and then paste it on the board and then check the grammar with them infront of others and I don't say the name just in group

4.12. FD's Second Interview
S; I actually prefer they discover the grammatical rules themselves but as a teacher all i can do is to remind them. The things I have just can do is reminding them like how you should put the sentence correctly not really teach directly like ok today we are going to learn grammar about presentation. I would like to avoid those kinds of activities but i want them to have the have the vocabulary first instead of grammar first especially for the weak students i try to give them as much vocabulary as i can and for the high proficiency students even though they are able to understand what i am saying and the passage but when they write i notice that they made a lot of mistakes so that is when i felt that i should have put more grammar substance in my teaching
According to the supervisor and I as the researcher SR and ALJ taught grammar completely deductively opposite to their claims. As FD and NRJ did not teach grammar during the time we (I and supervisors) observed them, we could not see their real grammar teaching but I think based on their interviews analysis, they teach grammar deductively.

5. Conclusion
The majority of the participants (8 of the participants) believed teaching grammar should be deductive and inductive depends on the students' level while a few of them preferred deductive method of teaching and some of them insisted on teaching grammar inductively. It can be concluded that a few of the TESL Trainees preferred teaching grammar directly the same as the time they were taught at schools. The reason of their avoidance from teaching grammar directly will be discussed in next article

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