

Teachers' Beliefs about Grammar Teaching within a Context of Omani Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The present qualitative case study investigated the beliefs and practices of six English language teachers in secondary schools in Oman about grammar instruction. To improve EFL education in Omani schools, the study sought to determine whether teachers' beliefs and their grammar teaching practices were congruent. The study collected the data through classroom observations and interviews, and analysed the data using content analysis and Grounded theory to analyze the data. The findings showed that even though most teachers acknowledged the benefits of inductive grammar instruction, they favored deductive grammar instruction. Teachers attributed their classroom decisions to various factors such as students' language proficiency, time constraints, and curriculum overload. In addition, the findings showed that teachers' learning experiences shaped their decision-making and instructional practices. The lack of professional development training was another crucial factor that influenced their beliefs and grammar teaching practices. The study concluded that teachers in Oman required more individualized training sessions that could foster alternative beliefs and practices in favor of inductive grammar instruction.

Keywords: Deductive and Inductive grammar teaching, grammar practices, Omani secondary schools, secondary school teachers' beliefs

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Introduction

As part of the educational reforms in English language instruction, the government of Oman implemented a new educational system known as "Basic Education" (Al-Issa & Al-Belushi, 2012; Al-Jadidi, 2009). The English Language Curriculum drew on constructivism as a learning theory. The emphasis of the textbook "English For Me" emphasized inductive grammar instruction to help students develop their critical thinking skills and actively engage in the process of knowledge construction.

Within the principles of these reforms, EFL school teachers were encouraged to implement the inductive approach to teach grammar. Nationwide, in-service training programs (INSETs) introduced teachers to the new curriculum and emphasized the importance of implementing the inductive approach. Despite the in-service training programs, Al-Issa & Al-Belushi (2012), Al-Jadidi (2009), Al-Siyabi (2009), and Al-Issa (2005) reported that teachers were not adapting well to the requirements of the new curriculum and favored the deductive approach over the inductive approach.

We know little about the motivations behind teachers' classroom decisions. The present study hence aimed to investigate teachers' beliefs to determine how they affected their instructional practices. Various studies showed that beliefs governed teachers' instructional decisions (Borg, 2011; Mirza, 2010, Phipps & Borg, 2009; Bellalem, 2008; Gallo & Renandya, 2001; Woods, 1996; Richards; Johnson, 1994; Pajares, 1992). Borg (2022), Bellalem (2015), and Basturkmen (2012), argued that teachers' beliefs influenced teachers' decision making. Current literature also indicated that more research was required about the relationship between beliefs and instructional practices because studies were inconclusive due to the abstract nature of the construct (Borg, 2022). Consequently, there was a need for more studies to increase our understanding of teachers' beliefs to enhance their teaching practices and decision-making.

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between teachers' beliefs about deductive and inductive grammar approaches and their instructional decisions. The study raised the following research questions:

1. How do teachers teach grammar in their classrooms?
2. What are teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching?

Literature Review

Grammar instruction has always been problematic and debatable. Batstone and Ellis (2009), Ur (1999), and Hudson (1997) claimed that teaching grammatical rules helped students learn languages more effectively. The current debate, however, was over which approach of grammar instruction was more effective. Larsen-Freeman (2015) argued that the scholarly consensus was that no single approach has been accepted.

Deductive reasoning informed deductive grammar instruction, which emphasized direct and explicit instruction of grammar rules. (Farwis et al., 2021; Larsen-Freeman, 2015; Widodo, 2006; Brown, 2000). Inductive reasoning informed inductive grammar instruction, which focused on developing students' cognition and understanding and emphasized indirect and implicit instruction of grammar rules (Larsen-Freeman, 2015; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Ellis, 2010;

Harmer, 2007; Richards & Renandya, 2002; Fosnot & Perry, 1996). In inductive grammar instruction, students are exposed to contextual language input and encouraging to learn through the process of discovery, inference, and critical reflection about the grammar rules (Scott, 2013; Widodo, 2006).

A considerable body of literature documented an ongoing debate about which approach could be more appropriate to the language classroom. There were fervent defenders on both sides of the spectrum. Hall (2011) and Hinkel & Fotos (2001) pointed out that inductive grammar instruction was salient in building students' autonomy. They further argued that it helped students build their cognitive skills by allowing them to examine the language exposed to them to construct the grammar rules underpinning the target language. Larsen-Freeman (2003) contended that deductive grammar instruction could be more appropriate for teaching beginners, but the inductive approach could be more appropriate for teaching advanced students more advanced or complex grammar rules. Larsen-Freeman (2003) noted that grammar instruction depended on two main components: the students and the target grammar items.

Brown (2000) noted that EFL teachers could utilize whatever approach they liked, depending on their students' cognitive abilities, learning styles, and the target grammatical structures. Furthermore, the interrelationship between teachers' beliefs and grammar instruction was widely researched (Azad, 2013; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Thu, 2009; Farrell & Lim, 2005). The literature generally argued that there often existed a mismatch between teachers' beliefs and pedagogical practices. Hassan (2013) stated that teachers' beliefs and instructional practices were not congruent. He argued that teacher's past learning experiences had an impact on their instructional decisions, which in turn influenced their beliefs in their classrooms.

Azad (2013) examined teachers' attitudes towards grammar instruction and concluded that, while they had positive attitudes towards the inductive grammar approach, they favored the deductive approach to teach grammar. Phipps & Borg (2009) also looked at the attitudes of three experienced Turkish teachers and reported that their beliefs and grammar instructional practices were not congruent. Farrell and Lim (2005) reported similar results.

However, the topic is under-researched in Omani contexts, so we have limited information regarding grammar instruction practices and beliefs of Omani secondary school teachers. Al-Siyabi (2009) examined teachers' beliefs about grammar instruction and reported that their beliefs were not in line with their classroom practices. The study revealed that teachers adopted the deductive approach to teach grammar, despite their positive beliefs about the inductive approach.

Methods

The current interpretive exploratory case study was concerned with the meanings that individuals developed as a result of their social interactions (Creswell, 2012; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). According to Bryman (2015), Wellington (2015), Paltridge & Starfield (2007), qualitative case studies allow researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of teachers' decisions and actions. Various studies used qualitative case studies to examine teachers' beliefs and instructional decisions (Bellalem, 2014; Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

Participants

The study sample involved six teachers from Omani secondary schools in the AY 2019-2020. The research used purposive sampling to recruit teachers to participate in the study. Table 1 provided a summary of the research participants' information:

Table 1. *The sample of the study*

Participant Pseudonyms	Gender	Experience	Place of Graduation	Qualifications
Aisha (T1)	Female	11 years	Ajman University, UAE	BA in Edu.
Fatima (T2)	Female	9 years	Rustaq College, Oman	BA in Edu.
Kawthor (T3)	Female	11 years	Sultan Qaboos University, Oman	BA in Edu.
Abdullah (T4)	Male	30 years	University of Leeds, UK	BA in Edu.
Mohamed (T5)	Male	7 years	Nizwa College, Oman	BA in Edu.
Omar (T6)	Male	7 years	Nizwa College, Oman	BA in Edu.

Research Instruments

The study used cross-sectional observations and semi-structured interviews as tools to collect data. The selection of these data collection methods was consistent with the interpretive paradigm of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Li, 2013; Seidman, 2013; Yin, 2009; Cohen et al., 2007; Woods, 1996). The study used two semi-structured interviews. Pre-observation semi-structured answered Research Question 1 about teachers' instructional decisions. Post-observation semi-structured interviews answered Research Question 2 about their beliefs and the factors that influenced their pedagogical practices. Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed for analysis. Classroom observations also answered Research Question 1 about teachers' instructional practices. Grammar classes lasted around 45 minutes each. The second round of interviews (post-observation interviews) was conducted immediately following classroom observations to invite teachers to reflect on their grammar classes.

Research Procedures

The research took place over six-weeks. Drawing on Farrell and Lim's (2005) framework, a checklist was developed to report on the instructional practices of teachers. We assigned Y when each criterion occurred, L when there was a limited incidence, and X when each criterion did not occur (see Table 2 below for a summary of the observation data). Semi-structured interviews were conducted immediately following classroom observations to shed light on teachers' beliefs about grammar instruction and the factors that influenced their instructional decisions and practices. The study adopted content analysis and grounded theory to analyze the data (Dawadi, 2020; Wellington, 2015; Charmaz, 2014).

Findings

Deductive grammar instruction was prevalent across the observation checklist of teachers' classroom activities.

Table 2. *Classroom observations*

	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6
Deductive Grammar Teaching						
1. Lesson was teacher-centred where teacher engaged in giving instructions, providing explanation, and eliciting responses	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
2. Teacher presented rules explicitly as "form + use + example"	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
3. Teacher used drills to consolidate grammar item	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
4. Lesson was mainly traditional with explicit teaching of grammar rules	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
5. There was noticeable use of grammar terminology by teacher and students	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
6. Teacher corrected all grammar errors	L	Y	L	Y	Y	Y
Inductive Grammar Teaching						
7. Lesson was communicative throughout	X	X	X	X	X	X
8. Teacher presented language examples and instructed students to discover the rules	X	X	X	X	X	X
9. Students practised the rules in authentic contexts	X	X	L	X	X	X
10. Grammar concepts were integrated into speaking and writing skills	X	X	L	X	X	X
KEY	Y: Observed L: Limited occurrence X: Not observed					

Except for a few rare cases in Item 6, when T1 and T3 did not consistently correct their students' language problems, all teachers' practices matched the deductive requirements, as shown in Table 2. Except for T3 who was able to persuade her students to exercise the rules in authentic scenarios and incorporated the grammar principles into their speaking and writing skills, there were no inductive occurrences. Interviews revealed that all of the teachers had positive beliefs about the role of grammar instruction in their classrooms. Teachers argued that grammar was essential to language learning because it helped their students become more proficient in the target language.

When asked about the grammar strategy they employed in their classrooms and the reasons for their choices, all teachers agreed that the inductive approach was practical. Teachers, however, found it challenging to implement, as it required extensive preparation and the use of additional materials, which were not accessible, and preferred the deductive approach, as evidenced by their classroom observations. They further argued that the inductive approach did not fit their students' level of proficiency as students found it challenging to infer the grammar rules and could not perform the tasks assigned to them. They also believed that it was not possible to cover the syllabus within the scheduled time if they were to adopt an inductive strategy in their classrooms. Fatima (T2), for instance, believed that inductive grammar teaching was:

(...) it is better than the direct method of teaching grammar, but our students may struggle to comprehend the various grammar concepts, and they may not always be able to complete

the assigned tasks. There is also a lack of materials, which could be problematic when employing the inductive method. [T2]

All teachers believed that deductive grammar instruction was more appropriate for their classes as it was easy to implement, saved the class time, and fit better their students' proficiency levels. Teachers also added that deductive grammar instruction helped students prepare well for their tests. Teachers asserted that their students preferred the deductive approach. T4 stated that deductive grammar instruction was more beneficial, as shown in the following excerpt:

I believe that the deductive method is more effective for teaching grammar to our students because it allows them to comprehend the rules and thus better prepares them for exams. It would be better for them if they knew the grammar rules directly. [T4]

Interviews revealed that teachers' past learning background influenced their decisions to use the deductive instruction strategies in their classrooms. Teachers argued, reflecting on their past experiences as students, that the deductive approach allowed them to understand the grammar rules better. T3, for instance, noted that she relied on her own learning experience as a school student to manage any barriers her current students faced while learning grammar, as shown in the following excerpt:

I believe that my learning experience has assisted me in deciding how to instruct grammar. It enabled me to help my students avoid the challenges I encountered as a student. [T3]

The interviews also revealed that most teachers had not participated in any training programs and hence believed they could choose the appropriate approach. Aisha (T1), for instance, claimed that:

We attended training workshops as needed, but there was no instruction on inductive and deductive grammar instruction. It is up to us to determine which approach is best for our students, but I believe we need workshops on the topic because it is so crucial. [T1]

We may conclude that teachers believed that they were not required to use the inductive approach and hence could choose between deductive and inductive approaches.

Discussion

The present study sought to investigate whether teachers' grammar instructional practices were congruent with their beliefs. Findings showed that teachers tended to use deductive grammar instruction strategies. Findings also indicated that although the teachers acknowledged the advantages of inductive grammar teaching, all of them implemented deductive grammar strategies in their classrooms. The findings correlated with many other studies. Phipps & Borg (2009) concluded that teachers' beliefs and instructional practices were not congruent. Lee (2008), Al-Siyabi (2009), and Thu (2009) reported that teachers were in favor of explicit grammar instruction although they portrayed a stance in favor of implicit teaching. Maqbali et al. (2019), Uysal & Bardakci (2014), and Farrell & Lim (2005) in their study of teachers' practices found that, although teachers had positive beliefs about inductive grammar instruction, they used the deductive approach because of time constraints. Similar results were also reported by Andrews (2003) who

noted that the majority of teachers preferred the deductive approach, although they showed positive attitudes towards the inductive approach.

Teachers attributed their preferences for the deductive approach to several external factors like students' language proficiency and needs, time constraints, the textbook, and the curriculum overload. Farrell & Lim (2005) found that teachers' beliefs were not always in line with their classroom practices because time constraints. In another study, Phipps and Borg (2009) found that students' needs and classroom time management were the main factors that influenced teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. Maqbali et al. (2019) and Al-Siyabi (2009) also found that teachers preferred the deductive approach because it was direct and required less time for preparation and instruction.

Research indicated that many contextual factors tended to influence teachers' beliefs and instructional decisions. Maqbali et al. (2019), Alghanmi & Shukri (2016), Rokhni (2009), and Borg (2003), pointed out that students' language proficiency, motivation, attitudes towards the language, students' needs and learning styles, the context surrounding the classroom, and teachers' professional development were key factors which influenced teachers' beliefs and practices. Johnson (1994) noted that teachers' instructional decisions were influenced by students' language level of proficiency. Chia (2003) also found that time constraint was a central factor that made teachers use deductive grammar strategies in their classrooms. Maqbali et al. (2019) and Azad (2013) reported that teachers believed that deductive grammar teaching improved their students comprehension of grammar rules.

The findings also revealed that the teachers' learning experiences influenced their classroom decisions. Gilakjani & Sabouri (2017) reported that teachers' learning experiences shaped their beliefs about language learning and education in general. Tantani (2012) and Hassan (2013) found that teachers' beliefs were shaped by their learning experiences, which in turn were reflected in their actual classroom practices. Within the same realm of thought, Lee (2008) noted that teachers' learning experiences influenced their beliefs.

Findings revealed that lack of training influenced teachers' instructional decisions. Several studies reported that teacher training programs potentially influenced teachers' beliefs and instructional decisions (Borg, 2019; Bellalem, 2014; Ellis, 2010; Pajares, 1992). Richards, Gallo & Renandya (2001) argued that teachers' understanding of grammar instruction informed their practices. Al-Issa & Al-Belushi (2012) noted that being familiar and well trained were the two elements that teachers often needed to make informed decisions in their classrooms. Alghanmi & Shukri (2016) asserted that professional development training and influenced teachers' beliefs and instructional decisions.

Conclusion

The study attempted to learn more about teachers' grammar instructional practices to check whether these were in line with their beliefs. Findings of the present study showed that, although teachers displayed positive beliefs about the inductive approach, they implemented the deductive approach to teach grammar in their classrooms. Teachers asserted that critical factors influenced their instructional decisions, such as their students' levels of proficiency and needs, time

constraints, and curriculum overload. Furthermore, findings showed that teachers' past learning experiences as well as lack of training influenced their beliefs and instructional decisions.

Implications of the Study

Research indicated that unsuccessful educational reforms resulted from teachers' negative beliefs about the innovations. The present study also recommended, therefore, that before introducing new curricula, there was a need for professional development programs to involve teachers actively in the change process. It was recommended that training programs and reflective practices would play a role in reshaping teachers' negative beliefs about the inductive approach.

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