Self-perception and practice in teaching grammar

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In recent years educational research has stressed the role which teachers' subject-matter knowledge plays in shaping what they do in the classroom. In English language teaching (ELT), although the importance of teachers' knowledge about language (KAL) has also been emphasized, we lack empirical insight into the relationship between teachers' perceptions of such knowledge and their classroom practice. With specific reference to grammar, this paper presents and discusses data from classroom observations, and interviews with teachers which shed light on this issue. These data suggest that enabling teachers to develop and sustain a realistic awareness of their KAL should be an important goal for teacher education and development programmes.

An important theme in research on teacher cognition has been the effect which teachers' knowledge of subject matter has on their instructional decisions. A series of studies conducted into a range of school subjects by Shulman and his associates was seminal in exploring this issue. With respect to English, the findings provided clear examples of the relationship between teachers' perceptions of their knowledge about grammar (KAG) and their instructional practices. In one study, a teacher who possessed a well-developed understanding of literature, but who was uncertain of her understanding of English grammar, displayed strikingly different teaching behaviours during literature and grammar lessons; in the former she was interactive and learner-centred, while in the latter she was didactic and teacher-centred (Shulman 1987). Grossman, Wilson, and Shulman (1989: 28) also reported that

The English teachers in our sample who were uncertain of their own knowledge of grammar tried to avoid teaching it whenever possible ... Teachers' lack of content knowledge can also affect the style of instruction. In teaching material they are uncertain of, teachers may choose to lecture rather than soliciting student questions, which could lead them into unknown territory. In teaching grammar, for example, one teacher raced through a review of the homework, avoiding eye contact with students she thought might ask difficult questions.

In the ELT literature, despite growing interest in teacher cognition (e.g.
Woods 1996), there has been little attempt to explore the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of their KAG and their instructional decisions. Andrews’ (1997) study of the relationship between teachers’ metalinguistic knowledge and grammatical explanations, for example, was not grounded in the explanations teachers actually gave during real classroom interaction. Numrich (1996), and Richards, Ho, and Giblin (1996), both found that novice teachers reported that they avoided teaching grammar because they felt their own knowledge of grammar was inadequate. However, these claims were never analysed with respect to specific classroom episodes. Thus, although the relationship between teachers’ subject matter knowledge and classroom practice is now accepted, our understanding of how teachers’ perceptions of their KAG affects instructional decisions in the ELT classroom is still largely undeveloped. In the rest of this paper I present and discuss data which shed light on this issue, and comment on the implications of these data for teacher education and development work.

Two cases

The data I discuss here come from a larger study of teachers’ practices and cognitions in second language grammar teaching (Borg 1999). During this study, teachers were initially observed teaching real lessons, and subsequently interviewed about their approach to grammar work. The aim of the interviews was to gain insight into the factors which influenced teachers’ instructional decisions in teaching grammar, through a discussion of classroom practices. The cases I present here illustrate the extent to which the teachers’ perceptions of their KAG emerged as one of these factors.

Eric

Eric was a native speaker of English who had been involved in TEFL for over 15 years. His approach to teaching grammar was largely impromptu. He rarely walked into the classroom with a predetermined grammar lesson, preferring to seize on language issues which arose during the course of activities, and to utilize a repertoire of techniques to help students think about these issues. For example, following fluency work he would often note down students’ errors and then feed them back to the class for discussion and self-correction, providing guidance, explanations, and practice as necessary.

When students asked Eric questions about grammar, his characteristic response was to refer these questions back to the class with a ‘What do you think?’ or ‘Can you help her?’ However, there were certain classroom episodes where he did not bounce students’ questions back to the class in this manner. In the example below, the students had just completed a ‘guess the object’ activity, and the teacher was reviewing the kinds of questions they had asked:

The teacher asks the students to repeat the questions they asked him while they were trying to guess the hidden object. As the students say the questions, the teacher writes these on the board, leaving blank spaces where the students’ suggestions are incorrect:

Do you use it to write ______?
What do you use it for?
Is it made of plastic?
What is it made _______?

The teacher asks the students for the missing words in the first and last questions. The students have no difficulty providing them, and the teacher writes ‘with’ in the first question and ‘of’ in the last. ‘Why is ‘made’ in the last sentence in the past?’ a student asks. The teacher seems surprised by the question, and unsure about how to answer. ‘Erm, because it is a passive’, he says, and moves straight on with the lesson, without further discussion of this point.

Eric’s behaviour here was uncharacteristic of his typical conduct in two ways. Firstly, because he was observably uncomfortable. Secondly, because he provided an immediate and direct answer to the student’s question and moved on without any further discussion. Here are his comments on this episode:

The reason for my discomfort was that I didn’t quite know what the answer was, I didn’t have an answer, ‘cause normally when I know the answer my response is ‘What do you think?’ And so what happened there was ‘Why is it in the past?’ I didn’t know, then I felt I had to come up with an answer.

The relationship between self-perceived KAG and action in Eric’s work is clear here. He bounced students’ questions back to the class when he felt confident he knew the answer (and given that this was his typical response, it follows that he felt confident most of the time). However, when he was less confident, he modified his characteristic behaviour, in this case, by answering the question himself, and not encouraging discussion.

There were further examples of this relationship between perceived KAG and instructional decisions in Eric’s work. In one case, where a student asked about the difference between ‘on time’ and ‘in time’, Eric responded that he needed time to collect some clear examples, and that he’d discuss it (as he did) in a later lesson. His decision not to respond in his characteristic manner here was, again, based on his perception of his available knowledge of the issue:

I was actually aware with that one that I’d had difficulty with that one before, and I’ve never come up with anything very satisfactory for students, and when she came up with it, through experience I knew I needed to come up, look in the Cobuild and come up with some good examples, instead of faffing about.

In this case, Eric felt from experience that he could not provide a satisfactory answer to the question without supporting examples. His perceived inability to deal with the request there and then led him to defer it to a later lesson.

A final example of the relationship between Eric’s perceived KAG and his classroom decisions comes from an episode in which he was helping students with the word order of direct (e.g. ‘What do you want?’) and indirect questions (e.g. ‘Tell me what you want.’). During the activity, the
teacher elicited a rule for such sentences: ‘If the sentence starts with a question word, use a question form [i.e. invert the order of subject and verb]. If not, use an affirmative’ [i.e. no inversion]. He then told the students that this is ‘not 100 per cent, but it’s 90 per cent’. I asked him about his comment here:

I was covering myself ... I didn’t feel confident enough to say that is the rule without exceptions. So I was just covering myself, if they came up with an example which that didn’t apply to, so it was useful to term it in terms of a guideline and a help rather than a rigid rule.

So, once again, Eric’s behaviour was influenced by his confidence in the information he was giving the students.

These data, then, illustrate that Eric’s self-perception of his KAG, in general, and with reference to specific points arising during lessons, influenced his instructional behaviours. His overall confidence in his KAG contributed to his willingness to conduct regular, impromptu grammar work. It also encouraged him to use students’ questions about grammar as the springboard for class discussion, a strategy he avoided when he was less sure of himself. Lack of confidence also influenced his decision to protect himself with qualifiers such as ‘usually’, or ‘90 per cent’, when talking about grammar.

Dave

Dave was a non-native teacher who had also been involved in TEFL for over 15 years. Grammar teaching in his work was rare, and given that (as in Eric’s case), he was not constrained to use specific coursebooks or materials, this appeared to be a conscious decision. He did in fact explain that ‘If I could avoid it, I would ... do as little as I can get away with.’ He went on to elaborate on his position as follows:

I don’t think I’m really all that keen when I have to do grammar ... cause I don’t feel very comfortable with it. That is, I always have the feeling that I might be asked something that at that moment will catch me unawares and I won’t be able to answer at that time ... perhaps it comes from the time when I was asked a question which I couldn’t answer, because it was a Latin word which I didn’t know ... It was a word in Latin which later I found was also used in English, but at the time I didn’t know and I couldn’t answer it because I didn’t know the word, and it’s always at the back of my mind, just in case ... it was right at the very beginning when I started, somebody asked me something about preterite verbs, and that stumped me.

A critical episode early in Dave’s TEFL career had a powerful impact on the way he felt about grammar teaching, and engendered a lack of confidence in his own KAG which had stayed with him for some 15 years:

Simon: So would you describe this as a certain insecurity you feel when faced with this aspect of language?

Dave: Yes, I do, I do feel a little bit insecure. When I’m faced with grammar I’m not really very comfortable.

Simon: Is it because you feel you don’t know enough?

Dave: Yes. I also get the feeling I might not be able to explain it
properly, or I might not come up with all the exceptions which
they might come up with at that moment ... I’m always a little bit
wary of that situation.²

The strong relationship between self-perception of KAG and classroom
practice in Dave’s work becomes even clearer when we consider that he
spent a great deal of time on vocabulary work, an area of language where
he felt he was strong:

Yes, I do admit I feel more comfortable [doing vocabulary]. I don’t
really like teaching grammar all that much. I feel rather
uncomfortable ... I’m always thinking there might be a question
which might stump me. In vocabulary that rarely happens.

Grammar teaching was rare in Dave’s work, and hardly ever
spontaneous. When students asked about a specific grammar point, he
typically made a note and promised to return to it in a subsequent lesson
(which he did, after he had time to prepare adequately). There was little
evidence of the kind of impromptu language work evident in Eric’s work,
a difference which would seem to be at least partly related to the different
levels of confidence these two teachers had in their KAG. However, there
was one notable episode where Dave dealt immediately with a grammar
issue that arose during the lesson. It started with a question about the
difference between ‘angry’ and ‘angered’ (perhaps Dave saw this as
vocabulary, and hence decided to proceed) and developed into a
discussion of adverbs and adjectives (S₁, S₂, and SS here refer to
individual or several students; T is the teacher):

S₇: What’s the difference between ‘angry’ and ‘angered’?
T: [to the class] The difference between ‘angry’ and ‘angered’.
SS: ‘Angry’ is stronger.
T: No, nothing to do with stronger.
S₁: One is a verb ...
T: One is a verb, the other one? Is an adjective. ‘Angry’ is the adjective.
S₇: Yes, OK, but the meaning is the same.
T: The meaning is the same. Not only an adjective, it could also be an
adverb. You could say ‘I am angry’, in this case ‘angry’ is doing the
work of an adverb. I am, how am I?, angry. ‘I am an angry man’, that
is an adjective. There are words which could be both adjectives and
adverbs, depending on how they are used. For example, ‘hard, this
problem is hard’; in this case it’s an adverb. ‘I couldn’t eat the hard
chocolate because my teeth were very sensitive’, in that case, ‘hard’
is an adjective, because it is describing chocolate. What is it Valeria,
you are not convinced?
S₁: In our grammar in Italy, it’s still an adjective, as in ‘it’s too hard’.
T: I said it’s ‘doing the work’; in the structure of the sentence it’s
appearing as if it is an adverb because it’s modifying a verb and not
describing a noun. ‘Doing the work of’, OK?

What is notable about this extract is not so much Dave’s explanation, but
the fact that at the end he assumed a defensive stance totally out of
keeping with his typically accepting, open, polite, and relaxed demeanor
in the classroom. The student’s explicit lack of conviction in Dave’s
explanation clearly exacerbated his existing insecurity about teaching grammar, which prompted him to behave in such an uncharacteristic manner.

Again, in contrast with Eric, Dave utilized a limited range of instructional activities when it came to grammar work. Dave exhibited a range of strategies for dealing with other aspects of ELT, such as reading and writing, but with reference to grammar this was not the case. In designing a grammar activity, his standard approach was to assemble examples of sentences containing the target structures from grammar reference books or teaching materials, and to ask students to analyse, classify, and derive rules from them. Here is a set of sentences he used in this way in response to students’ questions about infinitives and gerunds:

a They advised me to apply immediately.
b I intend taking up engineering.
c I began to realize why the course was so long.
d The garden needs watering.
e They will attempt to climb Mount Everest.
f John continued living in the old house.
g He suggested applying at once.
h The bushes need to be pruned.

Unfortunately, students were often unable to reach conclusions about the target grammar on the basis of such sentences, with the result that activities which were planned as inductive and exploratory typically ended up with the teacher conducting expository work on the grammar area concerned. In such cases the teacher provided quite categorical information, gleaned from grammar reference books, about the grammar under study, so that the students ended the lesson with a full set of notes.

Dave’s case, then, provides further insight into the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of their KAG and their instructional decisions in the ELT classroom. His lack of confidence in his knowledge led him to minimize formal instruction in his lessons, and to avoid spontaneous grammar work. His instructional repertoire for grammar work was also undeveloped, a fact which seemed to have resulted from his avoidance of grammar teaching over the years.

Discussion

The two case studies presented here raise a number of issues relevant to an understanding of the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of their KAG and their practice in teaching grammar.

First of all, these data suggest quite clearly that teachers’ self-perceptions of their KAG, both in general terms as well as at specific points in lessons, have an impact on their work. Eric was generally confident, and this was reflected in his typical approach to grammar (i.e. encouraging impromptu discussion, formulating rules on the spot); in contexts where he was uncertain, though, he modified his behaviour accordingly (i.e. providing direct responses, minimizing or deferring discussion, and generally hedging). Dave tended to lack confidence, and this, too, was
reflected in his work (i.e. minimizing grammar work, and deferring discussion). However, when he did feel confident, as he probably did with ‘angry’ and ‘angered’, he behaved uncharacteristically, and explained the grammar there and then. Although his confidence was not justified on that occasion, at that particular point Dave felt that he knew how to answer the question. Confidence (i.e. positive self-perception of ability), even when unjustified, motivates behaviour.

The data also point towards specific aspects of grammar teaching which ELT teachers’ perceptions of their KAG may influence. These are:

- the extent to which teachers teach grammar
- their willingness to engage in spontaneous grammar work
- the manner in which they respond to students’ questions about grammar
- the extent to which they promote class discussion about grammar
- the way they react when their explanations are questioned
- the nature of the grammatical information they provide to students

Certain contrasts between Eric and Dave with respect to these facets of grammar teaching suggest some obvious relationships between teachers’ behaviour and their confidence in their KAG. However, my aim here is not to argue for such relationships, but rather to highlight the impact which teachers’ self-perceptions of their KAG have on their work. We need to find out much more about these issues before we begin to formulate any generalized statements about connections between particular behaviours and levels of confidence. For example, from the data here we might be tempted to conclude that teachers who are more confident in their KAG teach more grammar. But data from other teachers not discussed here show that even when teachers are very confident in their KAG, they may minimize grammar work simply because they do not feel it is an appropriate instructional activity. Also, teachers may bounce students’ grammar questions back to the class, not because they feel confident (as Eric did), but because they feel unable to answer those questions there and then, and need time to think up an answer (while also hoping that some bright student will do so first). The way teachers perceive their KAG, then, clearly does influence what they do in the classroom, although (a) how this actually occurs may vary across teachers, and (b) teachers’ self-perception, is but one of a range of other factors which shape their practices in teaching grammar.

Finally, these data also raise interesting questions about the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of their subject matter and pedagogical content knowledge—the practical knowledge of how to represent and formulate this subject matter to make it comprehensible to others (Shulman 1986). Eric’s confidence was accompanied by a well-developed variety of instructional strategies for grammar work, which he applied skilfully; Dave’s lack of confidence was accompanied by a limited instructional repertoire for grammar work, which he applied less successfully. At the same time, Dave exhibited a well-developed pedagogical content knowledge in other aspects of his work, such as teaching vocabulary, or reading and writing. These data suggest that, even within one discipline, such as the teaching of English, teachers may develop separate strands of pedagogical expertise. Dave had developed
his expertise in teaching reading to a much greater extent than for grammar teaching. His career-long insecurity with grammar had led him to minimize it in his work, and without the on-going experience which fosters expertise, his pedagogical content knowledge for grammar teaching had not grown. Eric’s confidence, in contrast, had not hindered the development of his pedagogical content knowledge in this way.

Implications

Although I have illustrated my argument with specific reference to grammar, I would argue that the insights emerging here are relevant to teachers’ KAL in general. In other words, the way teachers’ perceive their knowledge about all aspects of language (i.e. grammar, vocabulary, phonology, discourse) will impact on how they view and approach classroom activities which focus the student’s attention on language systems. This finding has one clear implication for teacher education and development, which is that work aimed at developing teachers’ KAL should incorporate opportunities for them to develop and sustain a realistic awareness of that knowledge, and an understanding of how that awareness affects their work. Thus, in addition to enabling teachers to develop their KAL both during and after training, teacher education and development initiatives could address issues such as the following:

- providing regular opportunities for teachers to assess their KAL during training, and to pinpoint and address any areas of continuing difficulty
- equipping teachers to continue assessing their KAL throughout their career (e.g. by analysing data from their own classrooms, and completing periodical self-assessments)
- giving teachers opportunities to find out about the limits and shortcomings of their KAL in instructional contexts (e.g. learning about relationships between KAL and pedagogy, or between teachers’ KAL and that of their students)
- helping teachers to develop a positive attitude towards their KAL, while acknowledging that they are not infallible (e.g. examining notions of the teacher as an ‘encyclopaedia of language’)
- making teachers aware of the way in which self-perception of KAL can influence instructional decisions (e.g. by discussing data such as those provided here, and through action research in which they collect and analyse similar data)

Attention to these issues allows teachers to develop an extended, rather than a restricted, conceptualization of KAL and its role in their work. In particular, it helps them to understand the effects their perceptions of their KAL have on their classroom practice. Given the data I have presented here, this latter goal would seem to be particularly desirable.

Conclusion

Two conclusions emerge here. Firstly, the understanding of how teachers’ perceive their KAL, and what effects these perceptions have on their work, clearly merits further research. Given the growing importance of teacher cognition research in ELT this research should not be delayed. Secondly, developing strategies which enable teachers to become aware of their KAL, and to understand how this awareness influences their teaching, should also be an important goal for those involved in teacher education. Such work would also be timely, given
contemporary concerns in ELT with developing reflective, self-aware professionals.

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Notes
1  Pseudonyms are used here.
2  This quote suggests that the way teachers’ perceptions of their KAG affects their work also depends on their perceptions of their roles as teachers.

References

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