



## **“They have a Eureka moment – there’s a rule!” The role of grammar teaching in English as a second language in Norway**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates teacher cognition and the role of grammar in English second language instruction (ESL) and the use of the target language (TL) in selected secondary schools in Norway. The data include interviews with teachers, classroom observations, and a collection of term plans. The findings suggest that teachers consider grammar an important part of ESL-instruction in order to improve students’ writing and to learn a metalanguage that can be used for discussing the structure of languages. However, little time seems to be dedicated to systematic, explicit grammar teaching and metalinguistic discussions. Interestingly, focus on grammar seems to diminish as students’ language competence improves. Furthermore, most of the teachers say that they use a deductive approach, and speak both Norwegian and English when teaching grammar. The teachers also say that many students express that they have an intuition for what is grammatically correct, but that they still make mistakes. I conclude that increased focus on explicit grammar instruction and metalinguistic awareness and discussions may improve students’ overall proficiency of English.

**Keywords:** *grammar teaching; teacher cognition; ESL, second language acquisition; secondary school; target language*

### **Introduction**

English is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world today and probably the most important global Lingua Franca. It is widely taught as a second language (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL) in primary and secondary school contexts, as well as in higher education and in courses for specific purposes.

In Norway, English is compulsory in years 1-11 in primary and secondary school, and most inhabitants are extensively exposed to English through social media, music, series etc. Norwegians in general have good English skills, and are among the most proficient in Europe (Education First, 2019). Moreover, it has been argued that English in Norway is no longer regarded as a foreign language, but has an in-between status, on the verge of becoming a second language (Rindal, 2014; Aud Marit Simensen, 2010). In this article, the terms ESL and L2 are used interchangeably to describe English instruction in Norwegian secondary

schools, indicating a situation in which English is the second language learned by the majority of the students, after the L1 Norwegian.

Despite the status for English referred to above, it has been argued that many students do not master English adequately, particularly in more formal settings (Brubæk, 2012). This applies to writing skills and accuracy (Lehmann, 1999; Nygaard, 2010), as well as reading skills and vocabulary (Arnsby, 2013; Hellekjær, 2005, 2009). In addition, there is a need for an increased focus on communication skills needed in occupational contexts (Hellekjær, 2012, 2016), which is emphasised in the new subject curriculum for English that will be effective from 2020 (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019).

Based on the studies referred to above, I suggest that a focus on the communicative language teaching approach, as well as increased exposure to English in society at large through e.g. social media, films and music have led to improved ability among students to communicate informally about general topics. However, as many students seem to lack the ability to communicate adequately in formal situations, have a limited vocabulary and struggle with grammatical accuracy, it is of great interest to look more closely into what emphasis is placed on developing such skills in the teaching of English.

The current article is a part of a project that investigates the role of grammar in different language teaching contexts in Norway (L1 Norwegian, L2 English and L3 Spanish), and this particular study examines teachers' beliefs and practices with regard to grammar teaching in English in secondary education in Norway (years 8-13). In addition, it includes teachers' opinions and practices when it comes to the use of target language (TL) vs. the first language (L1). From a language acquisition point of view, it is of interest to investigate whether it is the L1 or the TL (or both) that is used for grammar teaching and in other instructional classroom contexts. This brings us to the following research questions:

1. What do teachers express about the role of grammar teaching in ESL instruction? (What do teachers say?)
2. What approaches and methods are used for teaching grammar in ESL instruction? (What do teachers do in the classroom?)
3. What is the favoured language of instruction for grammar teaching, Norwegian or English?

### Literature Review

The basis for English instruction in Norway is found in the English subject curriculum in the National Curriculum for Knowledge Promotion (LK06/13). The four main subject areas are: 1) *language learning*, 2) *oral communication* and 3) *written communication* 4) *culture, society and literature*. The term *grammar* is implicitly or explicitly mentioned as a part of the first three of these subject areas, which can be observed in the following wording: 1) “[...] knowledge about the language, language usage [...]”, 2) “[...]using idiomatic structures and grammatical patterns when speaking and conversing [...]”, 3) “[...] using orthography, idiomatic structures and grammatical patterns when writing. It also covers creating structure, coherence and concise meaning in texts” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2013). Consequently, the term grammar may not only cover syntax and morphology, but also *text-grammar* (i.e., knowledge of the grammar that is used to create texts) and *pragmatics* (i.e., how language is used in different contexts). Traditionally, school grammar deals with syntax and morphology (Hertzberg, 2008), and I therefore expect that most teachers associate grammar teaching with these language components, although other understandings of grammar may exist among some teachers. The focus of this study is hence on syntax and morphology.

### Teacher cognition

There is ample research on teacher cognition (TC) and multiple definitions exist (see for example Kagan, 1990; Pajares, 1992). Borg (2003, p. 81) defines teacher cognition as “the unobservable cognitive dimensions of teaching - what teachers think, know, and believe and the relationships of these mental constructs to what teachers do in the language teaching classroom”. Borg (2015) examined previous research on teacher cognition and grammar teaching, and found that teachers are influenced by their own language learning experiences as their main source of grammatical knowledge (p. 133). It may thus be assumed that teachers use the methods they were exposed to in their own education. Borg (2015) also found that teachers think grammar should be taught at least sometimes but rarely refer to research or any particular methodology (p. 135). It may seem as if teachers seldom make deliberate decisions about what role grammar teaching should have and what methods should be used.

### The effect of grammar teaching

Previous studies on grammar teaching in the L1 have concluded that it has no effect on students' writing skills (Andrews et al., 2006; Andrews et al., 2004; Braddock, Schoer, & Lloyd-Jones, 1963; Hillocks, 1986). However, these studies mainly include decontextualized,

formal grammar teaching. Other studies have demonstrated more promising effects for contextualised grammar teaching in the L1 (Fogel & Ehri, 2000; Jones, Myhill, & Bailey, 2013; Myhill, Jones, Lines, & Watson, 2012).

As for L2-contexts, the situation is different. Many studies suggest good results for grammar instruction (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Spada & Tomita, 2010) and *explicit* grammar instruction (i.e. rules are provided to the students) has generally been proven to be more efficient than *implicit* instruction (i.e. rules are not provided) (Norris & Ortega, 2000, p. 417). In addition to the explicit-implicit dichotomy, there is also a distinction between the *inductive* approach (i.e. students are exposed to language before rules are explained) and the *deductive* approach (i.e. rules explained first) (Simensen, 2007, p. 214). The widely used PPP-procedure (Presentation Practice Production) is commonly associated with the deductive approach (Richards & Schmidt, 2013).

Some studies of L2 grammar instruction suggest that grammatical accuracy is higher for inductive approaches than deductive approaches (Haight, Herron, & Cole, 2007; Ní Dhiorbháin & Ó Duibhir, 2017; Vogel, Herron, Cole, & York, 2011). In addition to supporting the inductive approach, Russel (2014), also seems to support the output hypothesis (Swain, 2005), i.e., students need to produce language themselves in order to master grammatical forms. Nevertheless, other studies support the deductive approach (Erlam, 2003; Mohammed & Jaber, 2008), so there is no conclusive answer as to which approach to grammar is most beneficial for L2 students. This is hardly surprising, seeing that there are important differences between learners in terms of factors such as age, aptitude, motivation and language learning experiences. Consequently, an approach that is beneficial for university students may not be equally suited to the needs of young learners. Importantly, in a school environment any kind of grammar instruction seems to be beneficial, compared to no instruction (Tammenga-Helmantel, Arends, & Canrinus, 2014).

### **Grammar teaching in a Norwegian context**

In a Norwegian context, some studies have investigated English teachers' opinions of grammar teaching, and found that negative attitudes to explicit grammar teaching prevail (Uthus, 2014), and that teachers say that students find grammar teaching dull (Burner, 2005). Both Uthus (2014) and Burner (2005) report that grammar teaching practices vary, and according to Burner (2005), most teachers without *hovedfag*<sup>1</sup> regard grammar only as a

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<sup>1</sup>*Hovedfag*: Typically seven semesters of study (210 ECTS), including *grunnfag* (60 ECTS), *mellomfag* (30 ECTS), *hovedfag* (120 ECTS). Replaced by MA in 2007.

tool, whereas teachers with *hovedfag* support more teaching of grammar as an independent discipline (p. 82).

As studies suggest that teachers are guided by textbooks (Blikstad-Balas, 2014; Brown, 2014), there is reason to believe that grammar teaching practices are influenced by the tasks in the textbooks. Burner (2005) and Johansen (2015) looked at grammar tasks in English L2 textbooks. It was found that grammar in textbooks is dealt with unsystematically (Burner, 2005), and that the tasks are traditional and test declarative knowledge, rather than encourage mental activity among students. Furthermore, tasks rarely reflect how grammar is used in real communication (Johansen, 2015). Feedback from teachers to students on oral or written work is an important part of language instruction, and studies show that students value feedback (Askland, 2010; Weaver, 2006). Most teachers provide post-product feedback (Nyvoll Bø, 2014), but there is also evidence of other practices, where teachers provide students with feedback before and after text revisions, more in line with the tenets of process-oriented writing practices (Horverak, 2016; Nyvoll Bø, 2014). There are few studies in a Norwegian context that test the effect of grammar instruction, but Horverak (2016) shows that grammar instruction inspired by systemic functional linguistics and instruction on text structure may have a positive effect on students' writing skills.

### **Target language use**

Research shows that *input* in the TL is crucial for language acquisition (Crossley, Kyle, & Salsbury, 2016; Krashen, 1985; Rothman & Guijarro-Fuentes, 2010). Polio & Duff (1994) found that teachers' use of the TL illustrated a general lack of awareness as to how, when, and how much the L1 was used. Their findings further suggest that switches to the L1 were made e.g. to maintain classroom order, to create empathy, to cover lack of experience or strategies, or to rephrase or modify the teachers' speech. Studies show that teachers' use of the TL impacts on the students and that the more the teacher speaks the TL, the more the students make an effort to do the same (Askland, 2010; Stoltz, 2011). In a Norwegian context, it has been observed that teachers of English may use the L1 for long stretches of time to provide e.g., metalinguistic explanations (Brevik, Rindal & Beiler, 2020 p. 103), a practice that may deprive students of opportunities for TL input. Hoff (2013), observed and interviewed six year 8 and year 13 teachers, and found that there are great variations in quantity and purpose of L1 use, and the L1 seems to be used inconsistently regardless of level. She argues that teachers need to reflect critically on their L1 use. A recent study of upper secondary school EFL learners in a Norwegian and a Polish context, suggests that students see L1 use, under certain circumstances, as an important tool for cognitive support

(Scheffler, Horverak, Krzebietke, & Askland, 2017). One may conclude that teachers' L1 use should be deliberate and used when it may serve as a valuable tool in language instruction.

## Method

### Research design

In this study, a qualitative approach was applied, using semi-structured interviews, observations and the collection of term plans and material used in the observed lessons. Such a triangulating technique may improve the validity of a qualitative study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Nineteen teachers of English were interviewed, six in lower secondary school (lss) and 13 in upper secondary school (uss), and 24 lessons of English teaching were observed. The project has been approved by the Data Protection Official for Research (NSD), and the teachers are anonymised.

### Research tools and procedure

The goal of the interviews was to investigate the teachers' opinions about the role of grammar teaching and their self-reported methods of instruction, as well as their attitudes to the use of the TL vs. the use of the L1. A semi-structured interview guide (Silverman, 2011, p. 162) was prepared and piloted before the interviews, which were conducted in Norwegian as this was the teachers' native language<sup>2</sup> and it was believed that use of the L1 would yield more detailed and nuanced answers. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed and coded using NVivo software. The quotes have been translated from Norwegian into English by the author.

Two to four semi-structured observations (Cohen et al., 2011) in each class were conducted after the interviews in which the observer took on an observer-as-participant position (Cohen et al., 2011). The purpose was to investigate what grammar teaching approaches were used in the classroom: whether the instruction was explicit (implicit grammar teaching may not be possible to observe), and whether the approaches were inductive or deductive. Furthermore, I wanted to observe the extent to which the target language was used in the classroom, and whether what the teachers said in the interviews about teaching methods and TL use coincided with their praxis in the classroom.

The term plans were collected to investigate to what extent grammar teaching was mentioned explicitly in the plans, as these plans are developed locally at each school, based on the subject curricula, and intended to be a tool for the teachers' detailed everyday lesson

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<sup>2</sup> Two teachers' L1s were other European languages.

plans. It was my assumption that topics included in the term plans stand a better chance of being included in the actual teaching lessons, than topics not mentioned in the plans.

### Sample

The data was collected from four different lower secondary schools and six upper secondary schools, which varied in size and study programmes offered. The schools were located in the southern and eastern part of Norway for proximity reasons. The participating teachers were recruited by contacting school administrations, as well as acquaintances, and asking them to participate or suggest possible informants. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). There were two male and 17 female teachers in the sample<sup>3</sup>.

Table 1 below presents the informants in terms of education, teaching experience, time spent in English-speaking countries and self-reported language proficiency. The informants are numbered from I 1 to I 19, and their real names are replaced by pseudonyms. I 1-6 work in lower secondary school, I 7-19 in upper secondary school.

Table 1. *Distribution of the informants across different variables.*

<b>Informant (teacher)</b>	<b>Higher education -ECTS credits, English</b>	<b>Teaching experience -years</b>	<b>Time spent in English-speaking country</b>	<b>Language-proficiency (self-reported)</b>
<b>I 1-Bente</b>	60	15-20	<1 month	B2 (cf. CEFR) <sup>4</sup>
<b>I 2-Gerda</b>	BA	10-14	>1 year	C2
<b>I 3-Anna</b>	90	10-14	<1 month	C1
<b>I 4-Janne</b>	60	>20	<1 month	B2
<b>I 5-Elise</b>	90	15-20	4-6 months	C2
<b>I 6-Nora</b>	30	>20	1-3 months	B2
<b>I 7-Sanne</b>	MA literature	5-9	>1 year	Native-like
<b>I 8-Lena</b>	MA literature	>20	>1 year	C2
<b>I 9-Hans</b>	90	>20	4-6 months	Native-like
<b>I 10-Kari</b>	70	10-14	<1 month	C1
<b>I 11-Nina</b>	<i>Hovedfag</i> lit.	15-20	7-12 months	C2

<sup>3</sup> Proportion of female teachers, Norway, across subjects: lower secondary school (ca. 75 %), upper secondary school (ca. 55 %). [www.ssb.no](http://www.ssb.no).

<sup>4</sup> The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment.

<b>I 12-Petra</b>	60	5-9	1-3 months	C2
<b>I 13-Mona</b>	60	15-20	<1 month	B2
<b>I 14-Vera</b>	60	10-14	<1 month	C1
<b>I 15-Reidun</b>	90	10-14	<1 month	C1
<b>I 16-Finn</b>	60	0-4	4-6 months	C2
<b>I 17-Gloria</b>	60	15-20	4-6 months	C2
<b>I 18-Grete</b>	90	5-9	1-3 months	B2
<b>I 19-Wenche</b>	MA literature	10-14	<1 month	C1

The teachers are qualified<sup>5</sup> and experienced teachers of English. Four teachers have an MA or *hovedfag* in English, and interestingly, all in literature<sup>6</sup>. All the teachers have taught for four years or more, and 15 teachers have taught for at least 10 years. Seventeen teachers are native speakers of Norwegian and two are born in other European countries, but with native-like competence in Norwegian. None of the informants are native speakers of English, but two claimed to have achieved native-like competence. The remaining teachers rated their proficiency as B2 (five teachers), C1 (five teachers) or C2 (seven teachers). Interestingly, eight of the informants had spent less than one month in an English-speaking country, and only four teachers had spent more than seven months in an English-speaking country. Consequently, it seems to be possible to achieve high levels of proficiency in English without spending a substantial amount of time in the target language area.

### Analysis

The analysis can be defined as a deductive, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in which “a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). The results are categorised in accordance with the responses to the three research questions (RQ) (Figure 1). As for the categories in RQ 1, they are based on the arguments that have traditionally been used to include grammar teaching in language education (Hertzberg, 1995). Only arguments that were mentioned by the teachers in this study are included in the analysis and in figure 1 below. The categories belonging to RQ2 are based on the distinction between implicit and explicit instruction and inductive and deductive approaches mentioned earlier, and the categories in RQ3 are based on the three approaches to TL use that were revealed in the interviews.

<sup>5</sup> Teachers educated after January 1, 2014, need 60 ECTS in English to teach *lss* or *uss*. Teachers educated before 2014 with less than 60 ECTS need to renew their competence before 2025.

<sup>6</sup> It is also possible to have an MA in English linguistics.



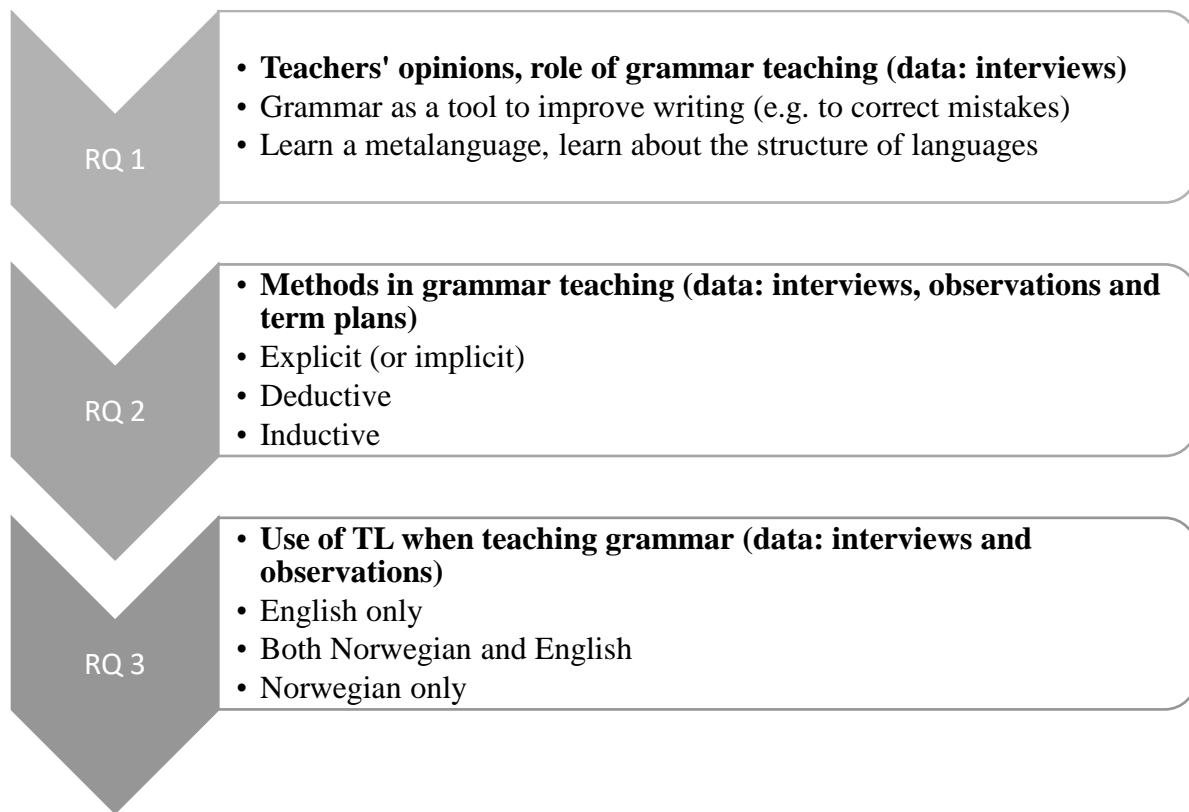


Figure 1. *Thematic patterns in the analysis*

### **Reliability and validity**

The reliability and validity of this study need to be addressed as the use of interviews and observations might give rise to biases, and it is inevitable that the researcher will have some influence on the informants (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 204). Triangulation of data (interviews, observations, term plans) was used to improve the validity of the study and all interviews were recorded and transcribed word by word. Pauses and non-verbal communication were indicated when found relevant. Extensive field notes of the teachers' behaviour were made during the observations. However, since the interviews were conducted before the observations, it is possible that the interviews have influenced the observations, i.e. the teachers tailored their lessons to fit the descriptions they gave in the interviews prior to the observations. To check for possible observer effect, i.e., participants changing their behaviour because they are being observed (Cohen et al. 2011, p. 473; Labov 1972), the teachers were asked to answer a post-observation questionnaire and answer each question 1-5 (see appendix) by ticking off one of the following alternatives: *agree - partly agree - partly disagree - disagree*. The results leave one with the impression that the observer had little impact on the teachers' praxis. All the teachers (N=13) said that they agreed (N=11) or partly agreed (N=2) that they acted as they do normally in a teaching situation. Most of them

(N=10) also agreed that the students acted normally, whereas three teachers partly disagreed. One said the students were quieter than normal, and another said they were more active.

## Findings

The findings are organised as follows: The first section deals with teachers' opinions about grammar teaching as expressed in the interviews. The second section deals with the methods and activities that are used for grammar teaching as expressed in the interviews by the teachers, as well as found in the observed practices and in the term plans. The final section concerns the use of the TL as expressed by the teachers in the interviews and observations of TL use in the classroom.

### *Teachers' opinions of the role of grammar teaching*

The teachers expressed that grammar teaching is an important part of English teaching, and it is apparent from the responses that grammar teaching means teaching the students explicitly about the rules of the language. However, the reasons for including grammar varied, and the teachers' responses can be divided into two main categories: a) grammar as a tool to improve writing, and b) learning a metalanguage and about the structure of languages.

As for the first category, the majority of the teachers (N=13: I 1-3, 7-12, 14, 16, 18, 19) suggested that grammar is important because grammar teaching can be a remedy for grammatical errors. Finn (I 16) is an example of a teacher who has increased the amount of time he invests in grammar teaching:

Grammar is very important, because the students show great grammatical weaknesses; they have a distant and strange relationship to grammar. [...] It's difficult, so we skip it... Many students relate to English in a very intuitive way. They don't remember rules. [...] Clever students use intuition and gut feeling, but the weak students make a mess. So the last year I have worked more with grammar than I used to before. They improve when they learn things like it/ there and basic stuff where they often make mistakes. They have a Eureka moment – there's a rule!

Petra (I 12) expressed clearly that grammar has “no value in itself. But it is of value if we can help students increase their competence in a specific way”.

In the second category, the teachers (N=7: I 3, 5-8, 13, 15, 17) expressed that it is important to learn about the structure of the language, and master a metalanguage that enables students and teachers to communicate more accurately about language and language learning. (Note that I 3 mentioned arguments that fit into both categories). Elise (I 5) said:

I think grammar instruction is important both as a part of Norwegian and English. It's important to provide students with a metalanguage they can use when we talk about language, it's important to understand that all languages have fixed patterns, and that these help us to communicate clearly and unambiguously.

Nora (6) said that language is made of grammar, and consequently we should learn about the way it is structured. She believes very strongly that grammar should be dealt with in a practical way, through usage, so one understands how important it is.

On the other hand, Reidun (I 15) complained that students do not master the metalanguage: "It's difficult to discuss language use in the lessons, because students don't have grammatical knowledge". She thinks that basic grammar teaching should be the responsibility of primary and lower secondary school teachers.

Nevertheless, some of the teachers in both categories (I 1, 7, 11, 14) admitted that they do not spend much time on grammar. Bente (I 1) said:

The students think it's dreadfully boring, so I don't spend more time on it than I have to. I look at their texts and see what they need. I do that both in English and Norwegian. That's the starting point. I don't do it systematically.

### **Approaches and methods used in grammar teaching**

With regard to choice of method and what was expressed in the interviews, the teachers can be divided into two categories: those who seem to favour a deductive approach and those in favour of an inductive approach.

#### **The deductive approach**

The great majority (N=17) of the teachers in this study expressed that they preferred the deductive approach. They said that they explain the rules first and that the topics they present are often based on what mistakes the students make: "I focus on grammar that many students struggle with" (Lena I 8). Elise (I 5) explained her approach:

When I teach grammar, I usually explain the rule first and then show some examples. The students write the rule in their notebook, as well as the example, and then they try themselves, solving different tasks. Sometimes I show them a lot of examples first, but I usually start with the rule. It depends on the topic and whether there is a very clear rule.

The use of the deductive approach seemed to be partly motivated by the fact that teachers seem to think that students like and prefer this approach. Mona (I 13) explained:

There are surprisingly many students who want teacher-centred instruction, and power points and grammar. They even write I want you to go through things on the blackboard. [...] Then I start thinking: I have read that gap-fill tasks are of limited value, but at the same time, maybe they ask for something practical to do, slow down, and maybe that's what "storage" is about, it's one thing to download it and do it, but storing it is important, so believe it or not, that's what they want.

Nonetheless, Mona also had her doubts about its usefulness: "But have they really learnt something, even if they think so themselves...I don't know, I ask myself that question".

Grete (I 18) also expressed that students like this approach and explained why: "Most of them are able to do something. They feel that they master it... [...] It's concrete and easy for them, now I am going to do this sheet and that's it". However, she also thinks that students can learn something, because "when we worked with -ing form some students expressed that they learned something new, so it was useful". She further explained that if she asks them "why do you use 'was' here?" she has experienced that many students just say, "that's the way it is, I can hear it". Nevertheless, according to Grete and many other teachers, students still make grammatical mistakes.

### **The inductive approach**

Only two of the teachers, Nora (I 6) and Wenche (I 19), explicitly said that they introduce new grammar by using the inductive approach. Wenche explained:

I make the students try themselves a bit first, and I present the rules later. It depends on the type of grammar we are going to work with. I have changed my way of working with grammar through the years. To begin with, I presented the rules and then the

students worked... [...] R: Do you think students remember more when they have to figure out things themselves? W: Well, I suppose I do.

Nora said:

I believe that curiosity creates joy of learning. Yes, and that you feel an urge to explore and investigate. [...] I don't present the rule as the first introduction. But I try to engage them, that's important, I don't like one-way communication. I want them to participate actively. And I often ask them to help me to figure things out.

To sum up, most teachers expressed in the interviews that they preferred a deductive approach to grammar teaching.

### **Observations of grammar teaching in lower secondary school**

In lower secondary school, grammar teaching was dominated by teacher-centred, whole-class teaching. The teachers I observed that taught grammar explicitly, worked with the topics *it is/ there is/ are* (Elise and Bente) and reflective and possessive pronouns (Anna). In the beginning of the lessons, Bente and Anna aimed at activating students' prior knowledge about the topics in question, whereas Elise explained the rules to the students in the beginning of the lesson, using the deductive approach. Bente and Anna's students were either asked to find examples of the use of *it is/ there is/ are* (Bente) or asked to explain what they knew about the topic *reflective pronouns* (Anna). Later the students were asked to write sentences themselves where they used the target grammatical forms (Bente) or to translate sentences from Norwegian into English (Elise). Here are examples of the types of sentences the students were asked to translate from Norwegian into English: *Det har vært en ulykke. Det var mye regn*<sup>7</sup>. Most students seemed to be able to produce sentences that were correct according to grammatical rules, although I did observe occasional errors such as "There are a house". Afterwards, the teachers presented the grammatical rules in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, which typically contained the rule followed by an example of how to use it: "We use *it* to talk about: times and dates: It's nearly one o'clock" (Elise).

Towards the end of the lessons, the students were told to do "drill type tasks", where the aim was to provide the correct grammatical form, either by using online tasks (Elise), multiple choice tasks on paper (Bente) or tasks in the textbook (Anna). Here is an example (Bente): *The room is empty. \_ nobody in it*. The students were to insert one of the following

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<sup>7</sup> There has been an accident. There was a lot of rain.

alternatives: *it is, there are, there is*. Most students seemed to be able to complete these tasks correctly. The teacher made this activity into a competition, and the students were asked to correct each other's worksheets after completion.

Gerda did not teach grammar explicitly during the two lessons that I observed her. There were situations in which it would have been natural to discuss grammatical forms, e.g. when the students were to place countries on a world map and had obvious difficulties explaining where the countries were located. The teacher could then have taken the opportunity to talk about e.g., prepositions, prepositional phrases and adverbials. Interestingly, I did not observe explicit grammar teaching that was based on situations that arose spontaneously in any of the classrooms.

The traditional PPP approach to grammar teaching is defined as a deductive approach because the teacher presents the rules first. In the observed explicit grammar teaching, Bente and Anna replaced the initial rules explanation by an activity that was based on students' existing knowledge. The second activity was a presentation of the rules by the teacher, and the third activity controlled practice in the form of drill tasks. Thus, these teachers transformed the traditional PPP approach into an approach that also included elements of inductive approaches.

There was a remarkable consistency between what the teachers expressed in the interviews about their grammar teaching praxis and what they did in the observed lessons. Bente said that she used different methods to explain grammar and that she used work sheets to make students focus on the task, and because they liked it. Elise said that she always explained the rules first, followed by translations and online tasks, because these were easy to adapt to the level of the students. Anna said she preferred deductive approaches, but that she also tried to activate students' prior knowledge. I observed all these practices in their respective classrooms.

### **Observations of grammar teaching in upper secondary school**

The teachers in upper secondary school expressed in the interviews that they did not spend much time on explicit grammar teaching, but I was nevertheless able to observe some of it. Petra, Vera and Finn focused on traditional grammar points such as *it is vs. there is/ are, verb tenses and concord*. They typically used PowerPoints to present the rules first and to provide examples of correct sentences, and the instruction can be defined as teacher-centred. The students were then asked to produce the rules themselves and provide

examples of correct sentences. This practice was followed by gap-fill tasks (Finn) or more complex tasks such as finding mistakes in a text or in the students' own texts (Vera).

Sanne and Petra focused on text-grammar, linking words and informal and formal writing. Petra asked the students why they thought she wanted them to use linking words. She also talked about compound sentences, use of comma, and that dependent clauses are often introduced by linking words. As was also the case in lower secondary school, I did not observe explicit grammar teaching based on situations that arose in the classrooms. Explicit grammar teaching seems to be a highly planned classroom activity.

The observed behaviour was consistent with what the teachers expressed in the interviews about their grammar teaching practices. Vera, Petra and Sanne expressed in the interviews that they explained the rules first when there was a specific focus on grammar in the lesson, which was what I observed that they did. Finn said that variation is important and that he tries to use a variety of methods in every lesson, because lectures do not work well in the class that he teaches. In the observed lessons he built up his lesson according to the PPP principle: introduced topic and rules, asked the students to provide examples of sentences that included the grammar point, and finally instructed the students to complete gap-fill tasks online regarding the grammar topic in question. This structure ensured variation in the lesson.

The explicit grammar teaching in upper secondary school followed a slightly different pattern than what was used in lower secondary school. The students were first presented with the rules (deductive approach), followed by controlled practice (gap-fill tasks) or the students were asked to find mistakes in their own or other students' texts. Whereas two of the lss teachers started the lessons by using activities based on inductive approaches and continued with activities based on the PPP structure, the uss teachers started the lessons with deductive activities and one of them finished the grammar lesson with a more open, inductive activity.

To sum up, there was a great deal of consistency between what the teachers both in lss and in uss expressed in the interviews about teaching methods, and what they did in the observed lessons. Although many teachers said that they favoured the deductive approach, the observations also revealed practices that were influenced by inductive approaches.

### **Use of the target language when teaching grammar**

With regard to language choice when teaching grammar, the teachers' answers fell into three categories: English only, both Norwegian and English, and Norwegian only.

#### **Teaching grammar in English only**

One teacher in lower secondary school and three teachers in upper secondary school said that they attempt to use the English only approach. However, some teachers who use the English only approach in general studies admitted to using Norwegian when teaching vocational studies: Petra explained: "In this (general studies) class I always teach grammar in English. I speak more English in general studies classes than in vocational studies classes". Lena, however, uses English also in vocational studies:

I teach grammar in English. I try to use English also in vocational studies, explain things in a different way. I don't think it's beneficial for the students if I translate into Norwegian all the time, because then they get used to it, and don't make an effort to understand. They can ask again, or I can explain things to them individually if necessary.

Nina's view corresponds with that of her colleagues: "I teach grammar in English. We don't explain much in Norwegian in general studies".

One might get the impression that young people today are under so much influence from English, that listening and speaking English comes naturally to most of them. However, Bente who works in lower secondary school has a different experience:

They (i.e., the students) expected me to speak Norwegian in English class. They didn't understand anything, they behaved badly, but now they understand more and I think they agree with my methods. It has something to do with attitudes. They were used to English instruction in Norwegian. I am very particular about only speaking English. I struggle to make them ask questions in English. Have to remind them.

This last quote goes to show that exposure to and use of English may vary greatly in different classes and schools, and it might be a struggle to make students accept the English only approach.



### Teaching grammar in both Norwegian and English

The majority of both lower and upper secondary school teachers said that they use both Norwegian and English when teaching grammar. The main reason seems to be to adapt the instruction to students on different levels and with different learning abilities. Teachers in lower secondary school seem to adapt their use of Norwegian depending on whether they teach year 8 or year 10, the difficulty of the topic and the students' learning abilities. Elise explained: "I use English most of the time, but occasionally I use some Norwegian when I teach grammar, depending on how difficult it is and whether it is 8<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade". Janne also said that she tries to adapt her use of the TL according to the levels of her students, but focuses more on the different levels of English skills that exist within the same class:

When I teach grammar I speak English, but also Norwegian. Because not all students understand. You try to speak English if the weakest students are not present, but I sometimes say things in English and repeat in Norwegian. I repeat to make sure everybody understands.

With regard to upper secondary school and TL use, some teachers (Sanne, Nina, Mona, Reidun) seem to make a distinction between general studies and vocational studies. Mona teaches vocational studies and said:

I try now, after Christmas, to speak English almost all the time. Also when I'm joking. The students can deal with it and understand it. [...] We don't work so much with grammar in vocational studies. Today we talked about adverbs and adjectives, and then I spoke a little Norwegian. [...] They like fill-in tasks. But then I explain in English, and in Norwegian afterwards. But when it comes to the metalinguistic stuff, I often do it Norwegian.

Reidun also teaches vocational studies and underscored that the practice she describes here applies to vocational studies: "I use primarily English, but sometimes we need to translate... [...] ...especially subject-specific vocabulary. I write for example 'nouns' and then '*substantiv*' in brackets".

There are also teachers of general studies (Petra, Maria, Wenche, Finn) who speak some Norwegian when explaining grammar, because they want to adapt TL use to the level of the students. Finn gives his reason for speaking Norwegian: "there are some weak students that don't understand much, and to explain things well to them, I explain in Norwegian, by

referring to the Norwegian system”. Wenche seems to share his view: [...] if the students are very weak, I speak both (languages). First Norwegian and then translate into English”.

Seven of the teachers said that they think it is useful for students to know about grammatical terminology, and Elise said, “I wish the students knew the most common word classes and were able to analyse simple sentences”. Even though students are supposed to learn this in primary school, the teachers claim that this is often not the case. So not only do the English teachers have to teach the students the terminology in English, but also about the subject matter of grammar.

Contrary to what Elise expressed, Anna said she thinks the students’ knowledge of grammar has improved over the last years: “They know what verb tenses are, present tense etc. In lower secondary school, I try to teach them the terminology in English. I like that they know the English terms. These are also found in the textbooks”.

There is no doubt that the overall goal for these teachers is to speak a lot of English, as they express that they use it “as much as possible”. Anna said that her “goal is to speak English all the time. But if someone doesn’t understand, I find myself speaking Norwegian”. She also reflected that she “should become more conscious about it, really...And make them speak more English”. Vera stated: “I try to speak English as much as possible, both when I teach grammar and other topics”. Gloria explained:

If I use Norwegian, I do it only to explain subject-specific vocabulary, to make sure the students understand. But not whole sentences, I use English as much as possible [...]  
The students have studied English for several years, it’s their second language, they hear it every day, sometimes several hours.

### **Norwegian only when teaching grammar**

Interestingly, only one of the teachers, Nora, a lower secondary school teacher, said that she uses Norwegian exclusively when explaining grammar. This is how she accounts for her choice:

When I present new topics, all the students are present in the same classroom, also those with special needs. So I have to take that into account, because the strong students understand things anyway. But very few students are able to understand it (grammar) in English.

Whether it is true that very few students at this level understand grammatical terminology in English, is questionable. It is noteworthy that Nora is the only teacher with less than 60 ECTS credits in English, and one may assume that her use of Norwegian may be influenced by lack of education in the subject.

### **Observations of use of the target language**

The results of the observations in lower secondary school are in line with what the teachers express in the interviews. Bente and Anna spoke English all the time, including when they referred to grammatical terminology. Elise spoke mainly English but translated grammatical terminology from English into Norwegian. She also sometimes responded in Norwegian when students asked questions in Norwegian. Gerda spoke more Norwegian than the others. She translated messages and instructions from English into Norwegian and summed up the main content of the lessons in Norwegian.

All the observations in upper secondary school were done in year 11. Five of six observed teachers spoke English the entire time. Vera, however, provided instructions and messages in English, and translated them into Norwegian afterwards. She also translated explanations that involved grammatical terminology into Norwegian. As for vocational studies, the teachers that I observed spoke English most of the time, and there was not much difference between the praxis among general studies teachers, compared to that of the vocational studies teachers. My general impression is that the majority of teachers in both lower and upper secondary school use predominantly English as their means of communication. Even if the focus of this study is the teachers, it is interesting to note that the students themselves spoke little English in the classroom.

### **Grammar in the term plans**

The term plans were collected after the interviews and the observations, and the aim was to see whether and how grammar teaching was mentioned in the plans, and whether the content of the plans was reflected in the observations.

In lower secondary school, six course plans from four teachers were collected. The lessons typically contain information about time period, competence aims, topic(s) to be taught, teaching material to be used and type of assessment. There is great variation with regard to inclusion of explicit, grammatical content in the plans. Elise mentions “how to use it/ there”, “how to use adverbs”, and “write better texts by using different sentence connectors” in her

teaching plan. As for methodology, working with grammar is described as “blackboard teaching and grammar tasks”. Interestingly, of all the term plans this is the only plan in which methodology is mentioned. Grammar is also mentioned in the part about assessment, as students are to have two “verb tests” in one academic year.

Gerda teaches both year 9 and year 10, and in year 10 there is no explicit mentioning of grammar, whereas in year 9, “understand the use of there is and it is” is mentioned in the plan for the spring term, and it is the only grammar point that is explicitly included. Bente teaches years 8 and 10, and in the plan for year 8 she mentions that “the students are to be able to recognise and use nouns, verbs and adjectives”, and “be able to recognise and use verbs in the simple past tense”. In the spring term, grammar teaching is “to be adapted to the needs of the individual students”. In year 10, her students are to work with grammar in connection with writing, and the terms *nouns, pronouns and determiners* are mentioned explicitly in the teaching plan. As for year 8, the focus of grammar teaching is “to be adapted to students’ needs”, but there is no indication of how this will be carried out in the classroom.

Anna’s year 8 teaching plan is different from the other plans, in that there is an extensive list of grammar points explicitly mentioned: *uncountable nouns, present tense, present perfect, modal verbs, personal pronouns, possessive pronouns, relative pronouns, there is/ are vs. it is, concord, pre- and suffix, progressive form, adverbs, prepositions, British vs. American English*. However, no information is included about methodology or teaching context, so it is not possible to know how she actually works with these grammar points.

In upper secondary school, 12 course plans developed by nine teachers were collected. The plans typically contain information about time periods, content, assessment and competence aims to be covered. As for grammatical content in the plans, there is an interesting difference between the plans for general studies year 11 and vocational studies year 11 and 12, even if the subject curriculum is the same. In the general studies’ plans, there is little explicit and detailed information about grammar instruction. The very general terms “sentence structure and verb forms” (Petra), “various grammar” (Finn), “building a sentence in English” and “grammar tasks” (Sanne), and “grammar assignments” and “verb assignments” (Vera), were mentioned. It is interesting to note that grammar is to be assessed according to the plans of the latter teacher, but there is no indication anywhere else in the plan about grammar instruction actually taking place before the assessments. Moreover, the topics “varieties of English”, (Petra, Lena, Vera) and “using a dictionary” (Finn, Sanne), may or may not indicate

some type of grammatical focus of instruction. One of the teachers also include text grammar in their plans, i.e. linking words and cohesion (Sanne).

In the vocational studies plans, grammar is mentioned more explicitly than in the general studies plans. There seems to be a focus on word classes, and the following are mentioned: adjectives (Petra), adjectives and adverbs (Mona, Grete), a/ an, nouns & articles, verb tenses & concord, adjectives & adverbs, pronouns, it is vs. there is/ are, prepositions (Sanne) and “basic grammar”: nouns, adjectives, verbs, grammar & sentence structure (Reidun). “Varieties of English” and “using a dictionary” are also mentioned in the plans (Petra, Sanne), but it is impossible to know if this instruction involves grammar. In two of the plans text grammar is mentioned i.e., linking words (Mona, Grete).

To conclude, there seems to be a similarity between lower secondary school and vocational studies term plans, in that both include explicit knowledge about the word classes. In the general studies’ plans, grammar seems to play a limited role, which is also in line with what the teachers expressed about grammar teaching in the interviews. Methodology for grammar teaching is only mentioned once in the lower secondary term plans. As for upper secondary school, neither in the term plans for general studies, nor in the vocational studies’ plans is there any information about methodology or teaching resources that are to be used in connection with grammar instructions.

### **Discussion**

The findings suggest that teachers think grammar teaching is important, either as a tool to improve the students’ language production, or to teach students about the structure of languages and to provide them with a metalanguage that enables teachers and students to communicate about language. The great majority of the teachers seem to favour the deductive approach to grammar teaching (rules first) and say that students seem to prefer this approach. The teachers say that many students seem to think that they master grammar implicitly, but they still make mistakes. Hence, the teachers usually focus on grammar that the students find challenging. The teachers also express that they do not teach grammar systematically, and that students do not like it much. The fact that grammar seems to be taught more systematically in lower secondary school and in vocational studies (where the level of English is usually lower than in general studies), may also indicate that the teachers mainly see grammar teaching as a remedy to fix errors, instead of something that may develop linguistic awareness and knowledge in a broader context. Such a supposition, namely that students with weak language competence need more grammar teaching, seems

to be shared by Spanish L3 teachers (Askland, 2018) and Norwegian L1 second standard *Nynorsk* teachers (Askland, 2019). An extensive focus on errors may lead to lack of motivation among students. As for the use of the TL, most teachers speak predominantly English, but some Norwegian is used for explaining grammar, providing new information and for clarification.

It has been claimed that teachers rarely refer to research or methodology (Borg, 2015). This also seems to be a tendency in the present study, although Mona reflected upon the methods she used and whether these contributed to students' learning. She reflected upon the fact that students were not able to transfer explicit knowledge about rules into correct written production and suggested that she will try a different approach next time. However, few teachers seemed to question the methods that they used, even if they complained that the students made the same mistakes repeatedly. This may come as a surprise, but might be explained by the fact that teachers are pressed for time and do not have much opportunity to reflect upon teaching methods or develop new teaching material. Neither do they have much time to discuss methodology with their colleagues. Consequently, teachers often rely on textbooks, which may offer traditional tasks that only test declarative knowledge (Johansen, 2015). Furthermore, teachers in lower secondary school complained that there are too few English lessons each week. Bente for example, said that two lessons a week are not enough, she would like four lessons a week. Moreover, teachers also expressed that students do not like grammar, so the consequence might be that teachers do not want to spend the limited time they have, teaching grammar. Another explanation might be that the teachers had little formal education as far as grammar is concerned, and thus found grammar a difficult topic to teach.

Nevertheless, there are teachers who expressed that they think explicit grammar teaching works. Finn said that students sometimes have "Eureka moments" when they discover that there is a rule, and Grete said that students expressed that they learned something new when they worked with the rules of the progressive form. According to Finn and Grete, the students seem to think that "they can hear" what is grammatically correct, but this is often not the case. Explicit grammar teaching may thus be beneficial in order to draw the students' attention to certain linguistic forms, which is also in line with the results of many studies, e.g. Norris and Ortega (2000), and it would probably also be advantageous to exploit the potential of grammar related questions that arise spontaneously in the classroom.

There may be a need for teachers to reflect more upon the effect of the different approaches to grammar teaching and develop and try out different approaches in order to improve students' grammatical accuracy. Such approaches should also include student-centred approaches to grammar teaching, in which students participate actively and take part in discussions that encourage metalinguistic awareness. Furthermore, grammar teaching should to a greater extent be linked to real communication situations.

As for the teachers' use of the TL, both the interviews and the observations suggest that much English is used, also for grammar teaching. However, two of the teachers used a substantial amount of Norwegian in situations in which this was possibly redundant. Teachers explain that they sometimes use Norwegian to make sure the "weak" students understand. However, one might question whether it is necessary to translate information such as "we don't need the internet now", or "write down new words" into Norwegian. Whether this practice reflects teachers' beliefs rather than students' needs is also addressed in a recent Norwegian study (Brevik, Rindal & Beiler, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

The focus of this study has been to explore secondary school teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching, their approaches to grammar teaching, and how they use the target language. Grammar is explicitly mentioned in the curriculum, where the term covers both traditional school grammar as well as text-grammar. However, there are no specific guidelines as to which methods should be used and how much time should be devoted to grammar teaching, nor are there any clear recommendations about TL use. Hence, the teachers' beliefs and practices may vary significantly.

As for implications for teaching, this study reveals that teachers find explicit grammar teaching both important and partly beneficial for students. However, grammar teaching seems to be conducted rather unsystematically, is scarce in upper secondary school, and perhaps most importantly, many teachers do not seem to reflect much about their choices of methods or tasks, and whether the students benefit from these choices. With regard to the use of the TL, most teachers use the TL extensively, but there may be a need to reflect upon whether there is a correspondence between teacher's beliefs and students' needs. Importantly, students should be provided with opportunities to use the TL extensively.

There are some limitations to this study. It would have been desirable to observe more teachers as well as observing the teachers for several consecutive weeks or months.



Another limitation of this study is that it was not possible to observe all the interviewed teachers. However, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) results are transferable if the sample represents the population one wishes to generalise to. Hence, the findings of this study are probably transferable to similar teacher populations and teaching contexts in Norwegian secondary schools.

Further research is needed on current grammar teaching practices, on the effect different approaches to grammar teaching have on students' learning outcomes and on students' use of the target language.

### **Biodata**

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## Appendix

### *Selected interview questions:*

What do you think about grammar teaching? How important is it in the subject you teach?

What methods do you use for grammar teaching?

Which language do you use for teaching grammar?

### *Questions, post-observation questionnaire:*

Q1: Having an observer in the classroom had no impact on my teaching.

Q2: Having an observer in the classroom made me nervous today.

Q3: I acted as I usually do today.

Q4: The class acted as they normally do today.

Q5: This was a typical lesson in this class.