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A study of contextual situatedness of English language teachers’ beliefs and practices about the form-focused instruction: A case study in Sandakan district, Sabah

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Abstract

This paper discusses the teachers’ beliefs and practices about form-focused instruction - a grammar instruction approach. It deals with EFL / ESL teachers regarding their relationship between beliefs and practices as well as factors shaping their beliefs. This study is presumed to give an understanding of the voices of classroom teachers who come across such problems during their daily interactions and develop working solutions for the recipients. In this study, my argument is that teachers’ beliefs are both intrapersonal and interpersonal, they partly originate from the public theories, and partly from their life experiences, and are modified through their practical environments. Actually beliefs are context-bound and situated, so the choice of a case study strategy presumed to be appropriate for the actual study to investigate the beliefs about grammar teaching, the individual teacher hold. This study is proposed to harvest certain approaches for grammar teaching strategies. It is also expected that such a study will have some contributions in adding to an understanding of teachers’ beliefs in terms of research methodology and theoretical understanding with reference to teacher cognition and professional development in the specific educational context where English is undertaken by non-native-English-speaking teachers. The preliminary study claims that expert theories of practice have little impact on teachers’ beliefs and practices and there is an indication that communicative language teaching (CLT) did influence teachers’ beliefs to some extent as articulated in the interview.

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1. Introduction

Within the field of second language (L2) teaching there is always a gap in the research agenda for L2 teaching due to a lack of attention to the teachers’ beliefs about grammar teaching (Borg 1998a, 1998b; Burns 1996; Farrell 1999). Given the fact that non-native EFL teachers face different challenges than those teachers whose subject matter, English is their own first language, non-native EFL teachers whose social and cultural backgrounds in which they teach the target language are different, their beliefs that language teaching may not be similar to those of native speaker ESL teachers. It is, therefore, critical that this research gap be filled.

It is necessary to uncover teachers’ beliefs and practices regarding grammar pedagogy to gain insights into why they favour a particular strategy. Such an understanding will contribute to the attempts to narrow the gap between theory and practice. For example, Borg and Burns (2008) conclude that “formal theory does not play a prominent and direct role in shaping teachers’ explicit rationales for their work” (p. 479). The reasons given for how and why conscious grammar was taught were based mostly on teachers’ perceptions of their own experience as teachers and learners (Eisenstein-Ebsworth & Schweers, 1997). This justifies the need to gain insights into the beliefs that underpin teachers’ actual practices in the classroom. Those insights will help researchers to be more aware of the contextual situatedness of teaching and teacher learning. Without those insights, it is hard to devise appropriate professional development approaches that can contribute to the improvement of the classroom life.

2. Background of the problem

The role of FFI in language teaching has become a crucial issue in the field of SLA. According to Spada & Lightbrown (1993) Form Focused Instruction (FFI) and corrective feedback within the context of communicative interaction can contribute positively to second language development in both the short and long term (cited in Shuib, 2009). Basically Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) refers to any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic forms (Ellis, 2001). This includes both traditional approaches to teaching forms based on structural syllabi and more communicative approaches, where attention to form arises out of activities that are primarily meaning-focused (Ellis, 2001). Long (1988, 1991) makes a distinction between two types of form-focused instruction: focus on formS (FoFs) and focus on form (FoF). The former, according to Long (1988), consists of the teaching of discrete grammar points in accordance with a synthetic syllabus where a linguistic target for a lesson is preselected. Language items are broken down into words, and grammar rules are presented as models to learners in a linear sequence. By contrast, focus on form (FoF) is defined by Long (1991) as overtly drawing the students attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication (pp. 45-46).

It seems that although teachers of English hold beliefs about the value of communicative language teaching (CLT) but show reluctance to genuinely practise it, as their main focus is grammatical skills and the text book. Consequently, the students are not able to use English communicatively, as they are expected to undertake and learn grammatical rules and to do grammatical exercises in the text books. The focus on mastering and rote learning of skills and applying them in examinations have eventually eroded communicative competence of the students. Now the question is that how the grammar should be taught, so it can result in maximum accuracy and confidence regarding FL/SL development. This calls for an understanding of the teachers’ attitudes and beliefs, as they are the agents of implementation of various teaching approaches in language learning for improvement, as it is believed that reform and change cannot be successful without teachers’ beliefs being oriented towards that.

Evidently, teachers are resistant to change and reinterpret the top-down change through the lens of their own knowledge and beliefs about the intended change, their students and their teaching. Comparing beliefs with knowledge, Nespor (1987) claims that while knowledge is conscious and often changes, beliefs may be unconsciously held, and are often tacit and resistant to change. According to Borg (2012), what teachers do is important, but if we want to understand what teachers do, if we want to promote change, we also need to look at their beliefs. In order to change teachers, they should be helped first by making their beliefs explicit in talk and action, then challenged in the light of theory (raise to consciousness the nature of personalised theories which inform their practice, Burns, 1992) and research (to address the research difficulty under the circumstance where teachers
limit their feedback to a single type in a real classroom, Ellis, 2009) through critical reflection (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

As the classroom teaching largely unaffected by the development in theory and research, always hard to understand the full meaning of theory without experience and difficult to resolve the tensions between teaching in the best ways possible and teaching to cover the curriculum content, so at this point the question of relationships between thought and action becomes crucial. In this regard Borg (2006) supports what Nespor (1987) stated that:

...teachers’ beliefs play a major role in defining teaching tasks and organizing the knowledge and information relevant to those tasks. But why should this be so? Why wouldn’t research-based knowledge or academic theory serve this purpose just as well? The answer suggested here is that the contexts and environments within which teachers work, and many of the problems they encounter, are ill-defined and deeply entangled, and that beliefs are peculiarly suited for making sense of such contexts. (p. 324)

So this study will investigate the teachers’ beliefs regarding grammar learning and the importance of grammar, as there are very few investigations in that field. The overall aim of this study is to explore the beliefs about form-focused instruction held by secondary school teachers, and the connection between their beliefs and practices. And to uncover the factors that influence their beliefs and practices. Therefore the following questions will explore and investigate the phenomenon under study.

3. Research questions

What beliefs do English teachers of a private secondary school in Sandakan (Sabah) hold about form-focused instruction?

(1) What are the primary sources for these beliefs?
(2) How do these beliefs are reflected in their classroom teaching of grammar?
(3) What factors affect teachers’ transfer of their beliefs into classroom grammar teaching?

4. Literature review

4.1. Grammar, form-focused instruction and teachers’ beliefs

For the purpose of this study, grammar may be defined “as the way a language manipulates and combines words (or bits of words) in order to form longer units of meaning” (Ur, 1988, p. 4). The teaching of grammar has always occupied a central place in foreign/second language teaching in general and in English language teaching in particular. Therefore, the teaching of grammar has been one of the long-standing debates in the field. The teaching of grammar is traditionally defined as presenting and explaining grammar followed by grammar practice activities, or just presenting and practicing grammar. Ellis (2006) criticises this as an “overtly narrow definition of grammar teaching” (p. 84). He then proposes that “grammar teaching involves any instructional technique that draws learners’ attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it (Ellis, 2006, p. 84).

The controversy over the role of grammar in second and foreign language teaching has centred around the argument whether explicit grammar knowledge supports or inhibits second language acquisition, or whether there is an interface between explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge (Ellis, 2006). Regarding this issue, there are three different positions: the non-interface position (e.g. Krashen, 1985), the interface position (e.g. Spada & Lightbown, 1993) and the weak interface position (e.g. Ellis, 1993). Ellis (2006) argues that:
the weak interface position lends support to techniques that induce learners to attend to grammatical features. It has been used to provide a basis for consciousness-raising tasks that require learners to derive their own explicit grammar rules from data they are provided with. (p. 97)

This leads to the birth of the form-focused instruction (FFI) movement in the early 1990s, which advocates a combination of a focus on meaning and a focus on forms (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Long, 1991). In a form-focused lesson, emphasis is on meaning, but learners are encouraged to notice forms in the input as well in order to maintain meaningful communication.

Clarke (1994) notes, those who pursue research are rarely found in language classrooms, and the knowledge and experience of classroom teachers are rarely incorporated into theory construction. According to Eisenstein-Ebsworth and Schweers (1997), teachers still base their grammar teaching on the perceptions of their own experiences as language learners and teachers, while rarely justifying “their approaches by referring to research studies or any particular methodology” (p. 255). Echoing these authors, Borg (1999a) points out that the theoretical differences regarding FFI “become blurred in practice” (p. 25), and classroom observation data show that teachers tend to “alternate between or blend these traditionally exclusive strategies depending on specific instructional factors” (p. 26). Evidently, while communicative teaching has been the order of the day, the role of implicit and explicit grammar techniques remains unresolved (Eisenstein-Ebsworth & Schweers, 1997; Ellis, 2006). In this regard, it is noteworthy that current issues in the teaching of grammar has to be reviewed, and the lack of empirical evidence within SLA research to provide clear answers about what, when and how grammatical items should be taught has to be pointed out (Ellis 2006).

Unlike Ellis, Eisenstein-Ebsworth and Schweers have recommended that in light of the lack of theoretical and empirical consensus [regarding explicit grammar instruction] it is crucial that we add to our understanding the voices of classroom teachers who face this problem on a daily basis and have developed working solutions for the populations they address. In the same vein, Burns (2009) recommends that teachers’ beliefs about grammar should be a central research avenue. To find ways of effectively integrating grammar into CLT practice, it is also important that teachers’ beliefs about grammar and the personal and practical knowledge they hold about ways of teaching it should be placed more centrally into the research spotlight. Fortunately, the call for examining teachers’ beliefs about language, language learning and teaching in general, and about form-focused grammar instruction in particular, has been heeded over the last few decades (Borg, 2006). However, there has been only a small number of studies conducted in developing countries, where insufficiently-trained teachers are working in a knowledge-based and examination-oriented educational system with limited resources and limited access to second language acquisition (SLA) theories. This study, therefore, will be an attempt to make a modest contribution to the community discourse and to give teachers a chance to bring their tacit beliefs about form-focused instruction to the surface.

4.2. Proposed conceptual framework

The present case study is designed to examine both contextual situatedness of EFL teachers’ beliefs about form-focused instruction and their teaching practices, as well as factors accounting for the correspondence or disparity between beliefs and practices.

As Clancey (1997) has pointed out, every human thought and action is adapted to the environment, that is, situated, because what people perceive, how they conceive of their activity, and what they physically do develop together. So in this study the current view is that relationships between beliefs and practices are interactive and ongoing (Richardson, 1996). Burns (1996) argues that one consideration in research into teachers’ beliefs is the social and institutional context in which teaching is practised. She develops a framework of three interconnecting and interacting contextual levels for studying teachers’ beliefs. At the first level, which is the broadest level, is the ‘institutional culture’ with which teachers interpret the institutional ideologies and philosophies. This contextual level creates the cognitive frameworks for teachers’ beliefs about specific teaching programmes and student groups. At the second contextual level are teachers’ beliefs about learning, learners and language, which guide teacher decisions on what to teach and how to teach it. And at the third and most specific contextual level are teachers’
beliefs about specific instructional behaviours in the classroom. Teachers’ beliefs at all these three levels are interdependent, creating “the intercontextuality of teachers thinking and beliefs” (Feryok, 2010; Tudor, 2003).

Tudor (2003) claims that the teacher’s reality is thus an ecological one which is shaped by the attitudes and expectations of students, parents, school administrators, material writers and many others including, of course, each teacher as an individual in his or her own right. The factors contributing to the gap between teachers’ beliefs and actual teaching practices may be rooted in teachers’ inability to articulate their beliefs, or in student variables (e.g. student proficiency level and learning attitudes or motivation) in educational contexts (e.g. a mandated syllabus, insufficient instruction time, large classes, grammar-based examinations). They may also result from institutional culture e.g. institutional requirements, heavy teaching load, negative collegiality, or from teachers’ wish to promote a particular image of themselves.

Breen (1991) suggests that by uncovering the kinds of knowledge and beliefs which teachers hold and how they express these through the meanings that they give to their work, we may come to know the most appropriate support we can provide in in-service development. In Burns’ (1996) opinion, such an endeavour will contribute to the development of “informed theories of practice”. These informed theories of practice is resulted from the interaction between teachers’ formal knowledge (i.e. theories of practice) taught in teacher education and their personal practical knowledge (i.e. theories for practice). According to her, teachers’ theories for practice construct “essential forces in determining behaviour” in the language classroom. These two notions of theories of practice and theories for practice will be adopted in this study to discuss teachers’ knowledge and beliefs. Such interaction is to encourage teachers to challenge their own beliefs in order to reconstruct their use of knowledge or skills, through a reflection on the beliefs that underpin their practices, and evaluate their beliefs themselves.

5. Research methodology

A qualitative, context-sensitive and in-depth investigation which employed case study research approach has been employed for this study. The instrument used in this study was based on the semi-structured interview with one of the private secondary school teacher in Sandakan district. The main purpose of this study was to find out the beliefs and practices regarding FFI and to see if the interview questions have any potential ambiguity or not. The selection of the participant was based on the personal relationship, as the advantage of studying people with whom one is already familiar is that access and informed consent are easier to obtain and the researcher may obtain more useful data about the case (Duff, 2008).
6. Data analysis procedure

The interview was conducted twice with the private secondary school teacher which was guided by questions covering different themes related to form-focused instruction, to discover the teachers’ beliefs and knowledge regarding form-focused instruction, within the relevant features of the context. The steps for the data analysis procedure of the semi-structured interviews is shown in the Table 1.

Table 1. Steps for the data analysis procedure.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step analyses of the semi-structured interviews</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Steps in analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transcribed all the recorded data.</td>
<td>Teachers’ stated beliefs about FFI</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gathered information through reading of interview transcript.</td>
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<td>Extracted the meaningful units from the transcript.</td>
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<td>Converted the meaningful units into condensed meaningful units.</td>
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<td>Using inductive approach, list the codes to guide the process by identifying key words and phrases.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organization of data into manageable units of categories, emerging from the data.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organization of themes emerging from codes and categories.</td>
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7. Findings

What beliefs do English teachers of secondary school hold about form-focused instruction?

7.1. What are the primary sources for these beliefs?

It is obvious from the interview that experience and personal knowledge is what has really influenced and shaped the teacher’s beliefs and practices.

“I will just ask them to participate. We allocated ten to fifteen marks for the participation in the class according to principal’s instruction. I find this way quite effective like I ask students to participate and at the end of my lesson I give them their name list and say, “those students who have participated during this lesson, come out and place a tick (✓) next to your name.”. I actually got this idea from one of my lecturer during my Uni. days.”

“For essays, if there is any grammatical miss error I just write the correct way of writing it by the side, but when it comes to speaking I don’t always correct them. I can recall some articles saying that “If we always correct their verbal errors somehow it will affect their confidence in speaking the language.” When it comes to speaking we do make grammatical errors that happily expectable and I don’t correct them immediately mainly because I do not want to affect their confidence in speaking the language. If it is very serious grammatical error I don’t tell them, oh, this is a wrong way of saying the sentence, I will just repeat the sentence a bit, the sentence they have just said, so that they know whatever mistake they have made.”

The teacher also told that she read some of the internationally published ELT materials about ‘Error Treatment’ and she is now planning to consider a new way of marking the composition for the senior section by categorizing their mistakes. As according to her, this way of error correction would be a bit challenging for the junior sections. She thinks for the students who are learning English as second/foreign language, in their composition if they manage to correct it up to 70 to 80%, she thinks it is good enough. At least it is effective.

“I am thinking of marking the work and then not to correct every individual’s mistakes. I will read through five to ten compositions and then I will categorize, that what are the mistakes most of them make. So I categorize under rule one, two, three, four. And tell the students that this particular sentence is wrong under my category one, so I will circle it and put number 1 and so on. So when I
Shafaq Fayyaz and Hamzah Md. Omar / Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 134 (2014) 201 – 212

She believes that instead of correcting by herself and the students copying the answer, which she thinks is not that effective because they probably just copy, without thinking and without absorbing. By asking them to correct it by themselves with teachers’ guidance, probably is more effective, because they need to think how to correct their own sentence.

7.2. To what extent are these beliefs reflected in their classroom teaching of grammar?

What is presented in this section is an analysis of the beliefs of the teacher in this study held about the importance of grammar in learning English as a foreign language with reference to the context of a specific secondary school. Information about these beliefs is gained from the interview conducted.

7.2.1. Importance of grammar/role of grammar

Data from the interview showed that the teacher attached a great importance to grammar in language teaching. She believed that grammar is the foundation for communicative competence to be built on, and she did not think that learners could communicate in English effectively and accurately without a good knowledge of grammar. She viewed grammar as the “foundation of language”.

“I think grammar for English language is actually like the foundation of English. Without grammar you can’t write, you can’t speak.”

The teacher also challenged the zero option for grammar instruction in foreign/second language teaching – as initiated by advocates of Natural Approaches (e.g. Krashen, 1982). According to her, non-native speakers of English have to face different challenges as far as grammar learning is concerned.

“The fact is that, we are actually learning English as a second language, so we are not the native speakers, must learn grammar, in order to know the rules of grammar. My friends who are studying overseas, who are born overseas they don’t have to learn grammar.”

“Of course students must be taught grammar especially so because our students as they are all not native speakers of the language so it is very important that students must be taught grammar.”

It can be inferred that when the students’ ability to use English for communication is limited, learning grammar seems to be more secure to deal with their linguistic limitation and to reduce their performance anxiety. She also have the view that grammar is more important for the writing purposes as compare to the oral part. According to her, grammar learning is a necessity as far as written work is concerned and needed only when the students’ educational purpose was to pass the exam.

“I think for grammar learning, basically it is beneficial for writing. Even the native speakers, when they speak English they do make grammatical mistakes, so to me really grammar is not that much important for the oral part.”

7.2.2. Grammar and communication: Role of explicit grammar knowledge

The teacher believed that in the context where students do not have much access to the target language environment, explicit knowledge is critical in developing their proficiency in the target language and being a non-native speaker a formal approach to grammar was more important if teachers did not want their students to use
ungrammatical English. While the debate among scholars and methodologists concerning whether to begin with instruction or communication is still going on, the teacher in this study stated that grammar teaching should precede the development of grammar instruction so that the students could apply the grammar they were taught to communicative activities.

“ Necessary to explain the rules first. After the rules then teachers should go through some examples followed by exercises.”

Nonetheless, it seems that this teacher favoured a form-then-communication sequence. According to what she said, the students need to be provided with the closed box with grammatical knowledge inside first, then they are requested to open that box through the act of using the taught grammar knowledge for communication in order to get the taught knowledge etched deeper in their mind.

“…… after I explain the rules, then the students will try to understand by applying the rules to the sentences which they have to construct.”

There are two important points that need to be considered regarding teachers’ beliefs about explicit grammar knowledge and a planned focus on form. First, the learning culture has always viewed the memorisation of facts as an important dimension of intellectual development, and the goal of schooling is the mastery of factual information as possible. Another point is the tradition of English language teaching, which has always emphasised the teaching of discrete-point grammar items. This is reflected in the textbooks, which are claimed to be in accordance with the communicative language teaching principles, but present grammar in one lesson to be delivered in one class period as defined in the syllabus. This implicitly informs teachers that grammar should be taught separately from skills work. It is, therefore, not surprising when the interview data indicated that the teacher in this study believed that learners would learn best when they were taught grammar carefully and systematically in terms of rules.

She also stated in the interview, that she personally thinks as knowledge of rules is essential for learning a language, but exposure of a language is also another important component to learn a language - which is a bit difficult in a non-native context.

“To me sometimes language learning is not something which is fixed only by the rules, but is more of your exposure to the language. If you expose to a language the way you write a sentence, you don’t have to memorize the certain rules of grammar.”

7.2.3. Approaches to grammar (beliefs about teachers' reported approach to grammar)

The teacher highly valued explicit grammar knowledge, and preferred a teaching approach which moves from form to meaning, starting with conscious learning then gradually shifting to subconscious learning. This is evidenced in the way that her thinking in the study appeared to be dominated by the Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) model of grammar pedagogy. She also stated in the interview that error correction was not just for the students who committed the error. Instead, it was a chance for the whole class to reconsolidate their explicit grammar knowledge.

“To check their understanding, I will ask them to try to understand whatever I have taught and then apply the rules to one or two sentences which they have to construct. Then students will come to the front and write out the sentences and then they will discuss together. I’ll also discuss with the students, come class let’s look at the sentence is there any correction that you need to make.”

She told in the interview that she believes in the interpretation of implicit knowledge as the knowledge retrieved from the students' long-term memory, rather than the knowledge discovered through the process of using the language for natural communication. In the interview, she also justified the PPP model as the suitable because, in a foreign/second language context, it is necessary for the students to be led into situations in which the target structure is used so that the students could work out the rules, form, and use of the target structure through induction. Though she did not name the model but whatever she explained showed her inclination towards PPP model.
“I start my grammar lesson by always asking students their pre requisite knowledge. When I teach tenses I ask them what have you learnt........? What do you understand of present tense? simple present tense? I let them involve by asking them questions then they will answer me, what they know about simple present tense. After going through the rules I give them examples and get them to apply these rules to a sentence which they have to construct on their own. Later I ask students to come to the front and they will write up their sentence. Finally I read and mark the sentence together with the students.”

However, the teacher acknowledged that she either skip the production stage or spent very little time on free activities because of time constraints. Understandably, time is always a big challenge for the teachers when they are mandated to cover two or three grammatical items within a 50-minutes lesson with a class size of around 45-50 students.

“When they do the practice if I have time maybe I also do just one or two exercises in the class. After explanation given, and examples and all that I won’t have time to let them do the practice in the classroom. So normally the practice will be like their homework which they have to do it in the house.”

7.3. What factors affect teachers’ transfer of their beliefs into classroom grammar teaching?

7.3.1. Experience as language learners

The learning strategies teachers learned as language students also affect their beliefs. The teacher explained that she had to make the students more involved, because it was on the other way round what she experienced as a language learner. Her experience as a language learner was completely teacher-centered with almost nil students’ involvement. That’s why quite boring, non-motivating and traditional. So she believed that students’ involvement is important for the students to learn and memorise grammatical rules because this learning strategy can work well.

“The effective way of learning grammar will be, have the students to be more involved in the lessons. This is due to my past experience as a student and also throughout my years of teaching I have joined some courses related to education or teaching English from where I have somehow grabbed this idea of having students being very active in class is actually much more effective.”

It is likely that the impact of the personal learning strategy the teacher employed for language learning is more powerful than that of how she was taught. She said that the way her teachers taught her English in primary school did not leave any clear impression on her, but the secondary school experience was quite boring and traditional. This could be that her student life has been in a distant past, and she may not have been so motivated as she disliked the way her teacher taught English.

7.3.2. Professional training

It seems that formal training did influence teachers’ beliefs and their instructional practices. The teacher in the study, who had been in her teaching career for more than eleven years, said that she attended in-service teaching courses and found that learner-centred teaching was the best teaching approach. This prompted her to reflect her teaching style.

“To me not only teaching grammar but for teaching I thought that the most effective way should be that students play an active role in the classroom. I got this idea from the knowledge that I grabbed during all those courses I attended related to my career. So I found it when you ask students to be actively involved in the class they will learn more.”
It is probable that to some extent the impact of formal professional training did have an impact on teachers’ beliefs and practice, but a limited influence. In fact, while articulating the beliefs regarding grammar teaching, the teacher didn’t refer to any key constructs in the SLA literature such as ‘focus on forms’, or ‘consciousness-raising’ (Borg & Burns, 2008; Eisenstein-Ebsworth & Schweers, 1997). Moreover, she used the ‘recast’ strategy but didn’t name it, seems as if she was not familiar with this name.

*If it is very serious grammatical error, I don’t tell them, oh, this is a wrong way of saying the sentence, I will just repeat the sentence a bit, the sentence they have just said, so that they know whatever mistake they have made.*

### 7.3.3. Experiential knowledge

Teachers’ experiential knowledge appeared to be the most influential on their beliefs and practices. The teacher explained in her interview that as being quite experienced, she make the lesson plan according to the requirement and follow that.

> *Most of the time when I teach grammar I just follow my lesson plan. I am already quite experienced. So when I plan for my English lesson I already know that what response I’ll get from the students so most of the time it’s like something which is within my expectation.*

The teacher also acknowledged that she valued the idea of letting the students for error correction through class participation from the example sentences she provided because this was in line with her teaching experience.

> *During class participation when students tell me the answers I ask them why? Why do you think that answer? Or why do you think that this sentence is correct, or incorrect? If the sentence is incorrect, how do you think that you should correct it? So they can come with the correct sentence. That is to make sure that they will understand. I guess it’s just through experience, experience as a teacher.*

### 7.3.4. Institutional factors

Institutional factors such as educational goals also influence the teachers’ beliefs. The information from the interview showed that the teacher preferred, that formal grammar instruction is necessary. In addition to the motivation to learn English for exams, the lack of communicative opportunities was the reason for the students’ and teachers’ favour of grammar.

> *We are not confined to choosing books set by the Ministry of Education but we have the freedom of choosing whatever books we want to, what we think is relevant to our students. Our students are sitting for PMR exams as well as the unified exams, so when we choose the book we have to choose one which is good enough to keep quick the students for both these external exam.*

The teacher also articulated in the interview that class participation is a quite effective strategy in grammar teaching, so few years back the school principal decided to allocate marks and keep a record to judge the overall performance of students including class participation. Actually the teacher herself found it quite effective, because according to her, students are always willing and ready to participate, as their marks will eventually be added in their overall grades.

> *Starting, I think about two years ago , the Principal has decided to allocate 30% marks on the performance. Out of this 30% , normally 10% go to the homework, 10% goes to the participation , and another 10% may be on the presentation . Let’s say I am teaching grammar maybe another 10% will go to their conversation that they do throughout the semester. So the participation stands for 10 to 15 marks. And I think it’s really a good strategy regarding grammar teaching.*
7.3.5. Teaching materials

One contextual factor that emerged from the interview data, but has rarely been documented in the literature on teacher cognition, is the teaching materials. The interview data show that the teacher in this study relied heavily on the textbook though she is not satisfied with the way grammar was presented in the textbook. According to her, the drawback of the textbook is the decontextualisation of grammar items, i.e., grammar is not related to other skills, lessons or even embedded within texts in the lessons. Such a criticism has some justifications. Meanwhile, she preferred to use the extra exercises and she learned how to deal with grammatical issues.

“Normally we give them the exercise from the book. We have chosen a book for teaching grammar which we think is good. But if it is necessary we also find extra exercises for the students.”

According to her, the textbook did not present grammar appropriately, she had to rely on extra notes. And sometimes she has to skip the topics as they are not that important, and time constraint is also another factor.

“I make important notes because I find that the notes given by the book is not straight forward, so normally I come up with my own notes, very short simple and straight forward points.”

“We normally just follow the book. We have chosen a grammar book which we think is good and relevant for the students, just follow the topics in the book and then we just teach. Sometimes I feel there are topics which I think are not that important then I skip, skip until the end of the year. If we still have time then we go through those topics, if I don’t have the time then just skip the topics.”

It is likely that if teachers do not have an easy access to expert theories of practice, (especially in Sabah) their experiential knowledge, and the teaching materials available to them are significant factors that shape their beliefs and personal theories for practice. These experiences are extremely important in a context where help from professionals outside the immediate community such as university professionals and teacher educators is not commonly, or frequently available while inspectors just come, observe the teachers and make ‘suggestions’ for change, then have the last word on whether the teaching is good or bad, right or wrong.

8. Discussion

The main purpose of the preliminary study was to find out the issues related to grammar teaching (form-focused instruction) in a certain context and also to find out the potential ambiguity regarding the interview questions for the dissertation. Given the fact that beliefs are context-bound and situated (Burns, 1996), the choice of a case study strategy is appropriate for the actual study. Such a research strategy will help to investigate the beliefs about grammar teaching that the individual teacher hold. The findings show the teacher’s beliefs about grammar as well as other aspects related to form-focused instruction, like beliefs about teaching and learning of grammar, approaches to the teaching of grammar, and error correction. The teacher explained how she implements her beliefs into classroom practices, as well as factors affecting the transfer of her beliefs. The study also explained that the teachers’ grammar pedagogy was shaped by her beliefs which were derived from her experience as language learner and language teacher, and the institution in which she works. (Borg, 2006; 2009). The findings also claim that expert theories of practice have little impact on teachers’ beliefs and practices (Borg & Burns, 2008; Eisenstein-Ebsworth & Schweers, 1997). However, the findings indicate that communicative language teaching (CLT) did influence teachers’ beliefs to some extent, but this is what she articulated in the interview.

9. Conclusion

The study indicates that the teacher showed a strong favour in teaching and learning grammar. According to her, students are the non-native speakers of English language and classroom is the only formal learning environment, so grammar should be taught in learning English. She also showed great importance to the explanation of grammar rules, and believes that examples should be provided to illustrate the target grammar point, so the students can work
out the rules from the given examples. As explicit grammar instruction and error correction are two sides of the coin, the teacher was in favour of error correction. According to her, this leads to the accuracy of English language.

10. Limitations

This study served as a preliminary study for an intended dissertation topic. As this study was based on the interview questions, so the extent to which teachers beliefs are carried out in their actual grammar teaching in the classroom were only verbal. However, for the full study, series of interviews and the observations will be conducted to gather in-depth and descriptive data for better understanding. The small size of sample used in this study might be inadequate for generalization to be made, therefore, for the dissertation, bigger sample size will be selected to ensure data saturation can be achieved.

References